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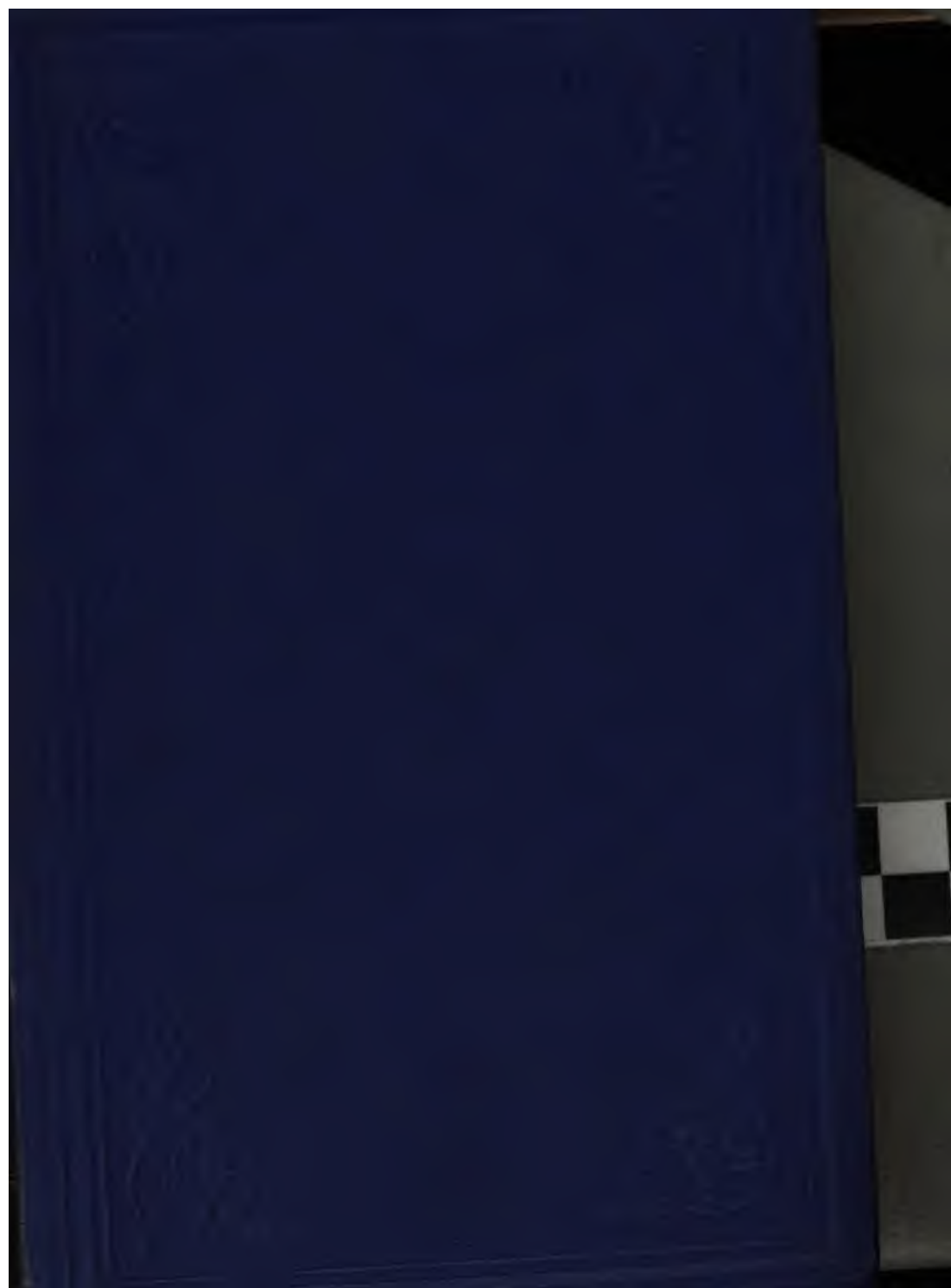
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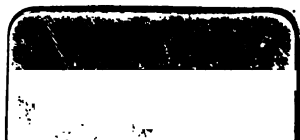
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A DANGEROUS SECRET.

THE HOUSE IN PICCADILLY.

PHILIP MORTON.

By ANNIE THOMAS,

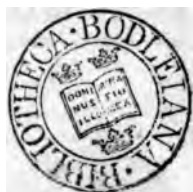
AUTHOR OF "DENIS DORR," "SIR VICTOR'S CHOICE," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

LONDON:
SAMPSON LOW, SON, AND MARSTON,
14, LUDGATE HILL.
1864.

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250. u 85.



LONDON; PRINTED BY W. CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET
AND CHARING CROSS.

P R E F A C E.

OF the three tales of which these two volumes are composed, it seems necessary to state that "A Dangerous Secret," although written and partly printed some months since, has never appeared before. "The House in Piccadilly" and "Philip Morton" have each appeared in the columns of *London Society*.

I am glad to avail myself of the opportunity, so courteously afforded to me by the publishers of these volumes, of explaining what has been condemned in more than one literary journal as my "fatal facility." The occasion of this charge was the simultaneous appearance of two novels by me, both advertised as new. The critics immediately took me to task, with some severity, for writing at a rate in which even masters of my craft may not indulge themselves with impunity, and I stood convicted in the mind of everybody who thought about me at all of a shameful hastiness in the highest degree disrespectful to my readers. Noticing, by the way, that the work of which I have most bitterly repented has not always been that which I have composed in most haste, I will briefly state facts which, as I think, constitute a

conclusive defence. "Bertie Bray" was completely written, and even partially published, before a line of "Denis Donne" was written. "Barry O'Byrne" likewise was completed before "Denis Donne" was commenced. Finally, "Denis Donne" is the only novel bearing my name since "Sir Victor's Choice," which has not been written very many months ago. To the success of "Denis Donne" I may doubtless attribute the unwelcome alacrity with which some of my old "new works" are being resuscitated. Whatever faults there may be in my last novel, I can conscientiously declare that none of them arise from hasty writing or slovenly composition, nor from the supposed fact that I was busy upon another story at the same time. Nothing that undivided attention and concentrated interest could do was wanting in "Denis Donne." I am learning, by an unlucky experience, the peculiar hardship of the fate of the bird in the old fable, who was slain by shafts feathered from his own wing. However, when a story which has been published in the *Sixpenny Magazine* and which is now announced for republication by Messrs. Maxwell and Co., has appeared, my serial errors will be over, and the last remaining bolt will have been let fly.

ANNIE THOMAS.

A DANGEROUS SECRET.

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A DANGEROUS SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

“ Love is hurt with jar and fret.”

So usual, prosaic, common-place, a scene! Merely a husband and wife about to take their seats at a well-appointed breakfast-table, in a well-ordered morning room.

The same scene was, probably, being enacted at the same time, in every one of the houses in the handsome west-end square, of which this was No. 4. It was so peaceful, happy, domestic-looking; a happy husband and father—a frank straightforward-looking English gentleman—opening the letter-bag, and handing an epistle across the table, to a still youthful English matron, a happy wife and mother, before he takes his cup of coffee from her hands.

The room is in the house of General Rivers; and while Mrs. Rivers is reading her letter, I will introduce the apartment and its occupants more fully to the reader. Perhaps the first thing that would strike a visitor on entering that room, was its exceeding comfort. It had the propriety, without the precision

of a dining-room ; the elegance, without the appetite-destroying properties of a boudoir ; the books, without the grimness of a library ; and the couches, without the upholstery confusion of a drawing-room. It was a room in which you might eat, read, write, take an afternoon's nap, or play a pretty, plain, little cottage piano which stood in one corner, without feeling that any of these performances were out of place within its precincts. It was a room without a strongly-marked speciality, and was all the more pleasant for being so ; the "heart of the house" to which each member of the family would repair when he or she wanted to find anyone else ; the room where all the plans for the day were formed ; whence everything agreeable emanated ; where the children sought their parents—the parents, their children ; where the husband consulted his wife—the wife, her husband ; the old Saxon name of houseroom would have been well applied to it indeed.

It was a fine September morning on which my story opens, and there was a certain autumnal clearness—"coolness" is too harsh a word to describe it—that rendered the small bright fire burning in the grate a more welcome sight than tangled shreds of tarlatan would have been. On the broad mantelpiece, were two or three vases containing autumnal flowers, among which the deep vividly-brilliant scarlet geraniums bloomed conspicuously ; a strip of half-finished embroidery ; a thimble ; some letters, lying there carelessly awaiting answers ; cards of invitations for "Gen. and Mrs. Rivers" to many a dinner and ball ; a list of the "General's engage-

ments," made out in the fair, running, delicate handwriting of his wife; a jeweller's case, containing a bracelet he had seen, admired, and bought for her yesterday; a clock marking the hour—nine—which witnessed this scene of peaceful harmony; and many another trifle "great" in this, that it proved the room was used.

Over the fireplace hung a portrait—the portrait of a young, beautiful woman, in a high transparent dress of crape, and with a slightly sorrowful shade over her face, that suited well the mourning garb. Though the shade of sorrow was there, you could tell, by the soft and refined flush of youth, health, and a not totally-destroyed happiness, that the shade was to pass away soon; perhaps even before the brush that had delineated it with such consummate skill had ceased its work on the marvellously rendered drapery. On glancing from that portrait to the lady who sat at the head of the table, you saw at once, that the beauty which had been painted by command ten years before, when General Rivers first knew, and loved her—the beauty of a young girl of twenty—had ripened now into a more glorious maturity, in the happy, handsome, matron of thirty. The soft violet eyes, shaded by long black lashes, were as sweetly clear; the same delicate flush dwelt upon a cheek as round and smooth; there was the same tender flexibility of lip, the same easy grace of motion in the more rounded form, as there had been when that likeness was taken. As she intently perused her letter, with her head turned slightly away from her husband, he almost said aloud, as he

fondly gazed at her, "As lovely, or lovelier, than ever; and it's nearly ten years ago."

"Twelve years to-day," she exclaimed, with an emotion in her voice, and a pallor in her face, that startled her husband, as she turned to him; then recovering herself suddenly, she continued, "I beg your pardon, General; what were you saying?"

"Only thinking that you are as good-looking now as you were ten years ago. Where are the children? why are they not down? and who is your long letter from, my love?" He had observed her confusion, and had determined at once to fully investigate its cause, but it was part of his character to be very methodical.

"I don't know, they *are* late; I will go and look for them."

She was in the act of rising, but he stopped her by saying, "Pray do nothing of the kind, Mrs. Rivers, I will ring. You have not told me yet who your letter is from."

For many years she had been his wife, and during all that time he had never once spoken harshly to, or looked coldly at her; for ten years she had been his wife, loving, faithful, and true, and yet now, when he asked her that simple question, she trembled, and turned pale.

She took up the coffee-pot, and poured herself out a cupful, and then, as he took his seat again, after ringing for their children to be sent to them, she said—

"It is only from an old friend—a schoolfellow

of mine, Digby; the letter would not interest you, I assure you, otherwise I would show it to you."

"I will be the judge of that," he answered, extending his hand for the letter, as he stood erect before her. He was a fine, tall, stalwart man; with an unmistakably military air about his face, voice, and his whole manner and person; no woman with such a protector ought to have trembled, and turned pale; such a man would be a mighty bulwark against all possible evil from without. The beautiful, loving, faithful, and true wife, of ten long years, did both. Then a crimson flush blazed up into her face, over neck, cheek, and brow, and she sprang to her feet—but she was checked momentarily, in whatever she was going to do, by the door opening, and a servant appearing in answer to the General's summons.

"I rang for the children, for Miss Rivers and Miss Sybil, to be sent," he said; "but we cannot have them now; your mistress and I are engaged." The door closed again, and they were alone, without the softening presence of the children.

"Digby," she said, nervously, "what is the matter? you startle me. Oh! trust me, Digby," she continued, energetically, flinging her arms round his neck, and laying her rounded cheek against his, in almost irresistible appeal, as she saw the iron shade deepening over his face.

He put her away from him softly—very softly—and gently, but firmly and determinately, nevertheless; the wife felt all the strength of that touch, but none of its softness; and her spirit died within

her. Her hand relaxed its hitherto strong hold, and the letter—from her nerveless grasp—fluttered on to the table. He advanced, and took it up; and then looked into her face with such a powerful appeal in his eyes, for her to *give* him the letter to read, that the tears rose freely in her own. But she put out her fair, slender hand, and took it from him, with a deep sorrowful sigh; and as the sigh died away, she said, once more, in the tones that were so dear to him, "Trust me, Digby, in this matter. There is a secret, dear; but it doesn't concern me, it's another woman's secret, and I have vowed to keep it for her, even from you; but it is an honourable one, and—Oh! Digby, don't, don't look like that."

There is one very bad thing which long service in the army is almost sure to engender, and that is, an impatience of being thwarted in the smallest matter. This feeling, so desirable for the better organization of military affairs, is rather apt to degenerate into something bordering on tyranny in social ones. Not but that in this case General Rivers was very right; his wife ought to have shown him the letter at once, as he desired to see it. But Sybil Rivers had strong opinions of her own on some subjects, and one of these was, that a woman had some duties to perform, as "friend," which were not to be made kneel upon the ground, and do homage to those superior ones of "wife." And in this consisted her sole error; but it was a gigantic one.

General Rivers tried to exorcise the demon of discipline that rose up in his breast; bidding him either to wrest that which he asked for, or to punish her

for not giving it to him. He tried hard to exorcise it, as he looked into the deep violet soul-fraught eyes of his wife. And as the words, "Don't look like that, Digby," fell from her lips, in the well-known, well-loved tones, never by him rendered faltering and nervous before, he almost succeeded. "Almost," but not "quite:" he strengthened himself with the reflection, that to all—to wife, children, himself—it would be an injustice to sanction this unconjugal reserve. It was "wrong," though "unimportant:" he would have had a deserter flogged to an inch of death, because "desertion" was wrong, though he himself would have gone through frightful mental anguish during the ceremony. On the same principle, though he really in truth did not care one atom about whom that letter might be from, he would now—rather than give up his point, waive his marital rights—frighten his wife into fits.

He sat down; he would have none of her caresses; he wanted obedience from her, not affection, and every woman knows what an awful stage that is in her journey through life, when the lover merges into the master. No wonder poor Mrs. Rivers trembled more violently, as he left her standing alone, while he was in this transition state. He sat for a minute or two, strengthening and giving force to his resolutions, by recalling such sentiments as the obligation there was on Cæsar's wife, of her being above suspicion. Not in those words precisely; no one does think in classical moral sentences when he is very angry, and General Rivers was rapidly waxing very angry indeed with his wife. She was develop-

ing a hitherto unsuspected trait; there could be nothing (of that he felt sure) evil to conceal, yet she was showing herself obstinate in concealing something.

"Sybil," he said at last, "for ten years we have lived together, husband and wife, without (so I have supposed till now) having a thought even unknown to the other. I have considered myself happier than other men, in having a wife who not only loved, but had entire trust, reliance, confidence in me. Do you still continue to refuse me that letter? Do you still refuse to prove yourself as noble as I have always proudly asserted my wife to be?"

There was a most winning, manly tenderness in his tones. Probably she was powerfully wrought upon; but she continued firm in one thing—her refusal to give him the satisfaction for which he asked.

"You are unreasonable, Digby," she said—and against a proud, just, upright man, there can be brought no more taunting accusation than this one of being "unreasonable"—"you are unreasonable. I tell you the letter contains a secret which, trifling as it is, I am bound not to divulge, because it concerns another woman. If you do not believe and trust me, you cannot consider me fit to be your wife or the guardian of your children."

People should never put hypothetical cases, when they are annoyed, to others in the like case. A great deal of bitterness is sure to be imputed to the opposing party, which perhaps he is far from feeling, but which he very likely thinks he ought to feel, as

soon as it is suggested to him that he does. General Rivers was no exception to the rule which applies to ordinary humanity. As soon as the proud, honourable gentleman was told by his wife that if he did not believe some hazy fact, he could not deem her a proper guardian for his children, he began to doubt the propriety of her occupying that post. He ceased his endeavours to exercise discipline, and said, in the stern voice that had possessed the power of conveying terror to a whole regiment:

"As you say, Madam! the woman who will seek to mystify, trick, deceive so trusting a husband as I have been, is no fit guide, instructress, and model for that husband's children."

A knife seemed to pass through her heart at the words; but with true womanly obstinacy she clutched her letter and her determination more firmly, and it was only her tongue, not her purpose faltered, as she asked—

"What do you mean, General Rivers?"

"That you will see your children no more until every thread of your 'secret,' whether it be paltry, as you say, or important, as I am beginning to believe it, be unravelled *by you* before my eyes."

She gave one hasty glance towards the room, which had been her heaven for ten years, where her little children had flown to her arms so many times, and a voiceless sob convulsed her heart as she glanced.

"I *cannot* tell you, Digby," she said, hoarsely. "Don't be cruel! don't say I shall not see my darlings again!"

She had no idea of contesting the point, though it

was of such vital interest to her. She felt that whatever his decision, by that decision she must abide.

"Don't say that I am not to see my darlings again!" she pleaded.

"Show me the letter."

"I *dare* not."

There was unfeigned terror now in the way in which she crumpled up the piece of paper and thrust it into the bosom of her dress.

"Then, Mrs. Rivers, you had better make immediate arrangements for a change of residence, for under my roof you will dwell no longer."

A cry—sharp, clear, distinct—the cry of a wounded woman, a tortured wife, a yearning mother—escaped her. Then she too beat down her feelings, and summoned her pride, and "*strengthened herself*," she called it, poor mistaken woman! "to bear his cruelty with composure."

"I will leave your house when I have seen my children," she said, calmly; "in an hour I will be gone from you;—will that be soon enough?"

She asked it with such bitterness as proved how awfully her heart was wounded. He replied—

"Yes, that will be soon enough; by that time I shall have made arrangements with my bankers about an allowance for you. As to seeing Sybil and Helen, *that* you will not do; I shall not permit it."

He then walked out of the room: to do him justice he would have broken down utterly had he stayed another moment. She threw herself upon the hearth-rug, and almost writhed under her sharp

anguish; she then drew forth the letter that had caused all this misery, and read it again, almost doubting that so small a thing could have wrought such harm.

Presently she rose, and slowly left the room for the last time. Oh! the *last* time! she thought, as with a lovingly gentle hand she closed the door her little children would so often touch, when she was no longer with them. Almost reverentially she trod the stairs they would be treading when she was away, and forgotten by them perhaps; and then she entered her bedroom and commenced her preparations for departure, with the feverish haste a woman who is nearly maddened by sorrow can apply to things purely mechanical. And so ended the happy, prosaic scene in the breakfast-room of No. 4, Eaton Square.

CHAPTER II.

“Source of joy and woe.”—“Foil of stern hate.”

I CANNOT allow Mrs. Rivers to go through my story with a shade, however slight, upon her. The perusal of the letter which, by arousing General Rivers' jealousy and temper, had caused the mischief, will more effectually remove the darkening tinge than anything I can say ; and, as whatever interest these pages possess is totally irrespective of any mystery, I cannot do better than clear up a portion of it at once for my readers.

On his return from India, ten years before, General Rivers had made a fatal mistake in the eyes of his family. His family consisted of a sister, her husband, and their offspring. The feminine and larger portion of these latter were undergoing a course of lopping, pruning, and grafting (educationally) at the hands of a very young and pretty lady, known familiarly as “the Teacher ;” and this “teacher,” to the disgust of the sister, who wanted the returned Indian's money to flow eventually into her children's coffers—and of the brother-in-law, who declared that “such marriages broke down those bulwarks society had ordained should be erected”—this teacher, through her unconscious witchcraft, caused him (the General) to commit his mistake.

He would not be prudent, he would not be discreet. He saw she was gentle, amiable, modest, intellectual and lovely: he heard that she was friendless, relationless, positionless. She had come to his sister a year ago, in answer to an advertisement that lady had inserted in the ["Times," with a recommendation from another lady to whose children she had been a conscientious daily drudge for six months. That was all that was known about her. He would like to have discovered more: but he looked into her face and was content; and executed his mistake by asking Sybil Lyndsay to be his wife. The little simple story she then unfolded bore too strongly the impress of truth for him to give heed to his sister's surmises as to "Miss Lyndsay having something—a love-affair, may-be—but certainly something, to conceal." The word-painting Sybil had given him, of a death in a country parsonage, and of a young friendless girl's subsequent efforts to battle alone, "explained everything," he told his sister, "entirely to his satisfaction." But he did nevertheless wish that, in his heart of hearts, he could feel that a portion of her past experiences was not a sealed book to him.

However he trusted, and married, and dearly loved her, and tried not to listen eagerly for a casual mention of some former friend. But the mention was never made, and the tried assurance grew stronger and stronger still that she had been indeed utterly friendless.

No wonder then, considering all things, that the sheet of foreign paper, covered with spidery scrawl-

ing caligraphy, should have been a thunderbolt heavy enough to rive asunder husband and wife. For he learnt for the first time, after years of most perfect happiness, that his wife Sybil, of whom he had been so confidingly proud, had a friend intimate enough to correspond with her, of whom he had never heard ; a secret, important enough to greatly agitate her, with which she would not trust him ; and a most determined and unsuspected will of her own.

Few proud, loving, hot-tempered men would have stood it ; and General Rivers was not one of the few. But for the letter :

“Dearest Sybil,” it began. “The news which greets me on my return to dear old England after my long absence is that you are married. I remember you writing to me years ago, to ask me to allow you to tell our painful story, and your share in it, to General Rivers. You were mad to think of such a thing. I still hold you to your vow of secrecy ; the necessity for it is as strong as ever. No one can prove that the dreadful horse walked over the cliff of its own accord ; indeed—but it is too painful to dwell upon. We have never corresponded since I answered that letter. Of course mamma’s death was a great blow to me, but the thought that in her Walter lost his only enemy, consoled me. But he thought differently, I suppose, for he was angry with me for proposing to assume our proper name, and he would not hear of my confiding in my old friend Mr. Abbot, mamma’s lawyer, when I went to claim my property. The poor old gentleman was very harsh

and ill-bred, and unpleasant about many things. He spoke severely about my going to marry 'another man' so soon; for to save future trouble I told him I was going to marry Ponsonby. It would not have done, you know, to say I was already married—for he might have called upon me to produce my husband; a mere lover is different—and the affair was still so fresh that the identity of Ponsonby with Buller might have been discovered.

"Little egotistical as I am, I must remember that you will like to hear a few details about my life since we parted. I have enjoyed myself on the Continent so; nothing in fact save the general lightness and brightness pervading everything abroad could have restored me after such fearful shocks. I have two sweet children—a boy, the eldest, *so* handsome and spirited; and a daughter, who bids fair to be as lovely as her mother *was*.

"We have hired a lovely place in Norfolk, 'Waltham Priory.' I wish I could ask you to visit us here, but I can't, for we can only know each other if we get introduced incidentally in society. For Heaven's sake do not let your husband see this; I tremble when I think of what the consequences of my imprudence in writing to you at all would be if you were to do so.—I am your old and attached friend,

"ALICE."

For the explanation of this epistle I must go back to a period long prior to its being written. Twelve years before, a widow lady, accompanied by her daughter and son, had taken up her abode in a pretty

house, in a small picturesque fishing village, on the south coast. Mrs. Leslie was an old lady of weird aspect, a fine pungently hot temper, a well-developed distrust of mankind, and much wealth. Being all this, her advent created a considerable sensation in the village. The interest attaching to her was however destined to be greatly deepened before she quitted it for ever.

Alice Leslie, a very lovely blonde of one-and-twenty,—though in right of her loveliness and of her reported share in her mother's reputed wealth, of sufficient importance to make the whole neighbourhood palpitate and throb with anxiety to see and know more about her,—Alice—whom misguided outsiders regarded as a pearl of great price—was a mere cipher in the eyes and estimation of her mother. Mrs. Leslie, of course, liked Alice, and hoped she would do well in life, and be happy and comfortable. Further she insisted upon Alice invariably taking pedestrian exercise by the side of her Bath chair, when she went out to take the air,—fiercely. But all the love of which her strong passionate nature was capable was lavished upon her son.

He was six years the junior of the sister, who had trembled before him from the time he was two years old, for the boy had early been gifted with the grand despotic qualities which, if mistaken and treated as bravery and pluck, rapidly render their possessor an obnoxious monster to so much of humanity as comes under his sway. He tyrannized over Alice—that was to be expected, younger brothers always do tyrannize over their sisters—but worse than this, he was rigor-

ous in the management of the mother, who idolized him, and so kept up in all its early vigour the pungency of that temper which otherwise Time might have softened.

Mrs. Leslie, who had much of weakness and bodily suffering to go through herself, was never tired of admiring and expatiating upon "Fred's health and strength, and rough restless excitability, and daring spirit." She worshipped the boy, partly because he was her own son, and partly because he was the son of the man who had ill-treated her through a long course of years; who had cowed her, and been cringed to by her, and profoundly lamented by her when he died. The boy subdued her, as his father had done before him, as indeed only women with the tigress part of their nature developed too strongly *can* be subdued. He was rough, cross, insolent, savage to her at times; and she gloried in it all, and gave him in return a world of love, and adoration, and indulgence. She turned with indifference from the fair, soft, gentle loveliness, and tame spiritless obedience of her daughter, to gaze with rapture on the hard, healthy, red round cheeks, brown bold eyes, and square robust form of her son.

By-and-by the little party in the pretty house had an occasional addition. A Mr. Buller came down to the same village in an idle fit, and with apparently no other motive than a desire to while away a few weeks inoffensively by means of a lot of new novels, a couple of splendid horses, and a fine Newfoundland dog. But he rendered an incidental service one day on the beach to the weird-looking widow, whose

propelling power, in the shape of a boy in buttons, was proving himself incapable of pushing her up out of the way of the rapidly advancing tide, and through this got acquainted with Mrs. Leslie and her daughter.

There had been only one marked characteristic in Mr. Buller's career heretofore, and that was his constant, earnest endeavour to secure his own peace, quietness, ease, and comfort, on all possible occasions. These sometimes failed him, for despite his mode of living, he was not a rich man. As he said himself, "he was a fellow who only asked one thing of the world—to be let alone;" but this modest aspiration was not always granted, for letting alone with him meant that he was never to be put to the smallest inconvenience by any living being. Now as those who supplied him with the things that conduced to his ease and comfort were heartlessly not always to be satisfied with thanks and good wishes alone for payment, he was sometimes put to very great inconvenience indeed.

He was one of those amiable, joyous men, with fluctuating blue eyes, and an undecided gait, and mouth, who are only fitted to walk in the sunbeams. You felt as it withdrew itself from your shake, that the satin-textured hand would never grasp an unpleasant fact, or take the sting out of a single nettle through determination. It would push the fact out of sight wrap a veil (no matter how transparent) over it, do anything, indeed, rather than take it up and test its disagreeable qualities. As for the nettle, it would delicately insert it into the hand of another, and

leave it to that other entirely as to whether the sting should be taken out or not.

Such as he was, he became a very frequent visitor at Mrs. Leslie's house, and just as her fiery black orbs were opening to the knowledge that he was hanging about Alice's presence a great deal too often for a mere casual acquaintance, he asked, with all due and respectful formality, and with no displeasing eagerness (Mrs. Leslie would have disliked a man to rejection point, who had been "eager" to marry Alice), for that young lady's hand.

The answers he returned to a fierce little catechism, as to who he was? and what he had been doing before? and who his father's mother was? and who his mother's father was?—these being all perfectly satisfactory, inasmuch as they proved he was not (though respectable) of sufficient importance to overshadow Fred in the eyes of their own set, the hand was pledged to him, and he was permitted to spend his evenings at their house constantly, always provided he showed an obliging willingness to contribute to Frederick's amusement, either by suffering much light-hearted ridicule at the hands of the boy, whom he cordially detested; or by engaging with him in the entertaining game of cribbage. And so for a time the course of true love ran smoothly—even flatly—enough.

Mrs. Leslie confessed with a witching candour, that materially endeared her to the heart of her future son-in-law, that she had been influenced by two or three considerations, in thus immediately giving her consent to a marriage which would remove the whit-

ting block on which Fred could always sharpen his knife of blunt sarcasm, and coarse domineering hatchet of fraternal power. In the first place, Alice, being Miss Leslie, must marry sooner or later, therefore the sooner the trouble was over the better for Mrs. Leslie. Again, if she were thwarted now, Alice might by-and-by illustrate the story of the oft-trodden-upon worm, and insist on marrying some person who would be actively disagreeable to her brother. While in this case though Fred disliked, he still tolerated Mr. Buller, and was good enough to observe in the courtyard of the inn where Buller and his horses were located, that "he (Buller) was a great fool, but a good fellow in his way, and would do very well for Alice." The speech caused great mirth among the ostlers and waiters—they were of the calibre to appreciate its rare refinement—but it got repeated to Mr. Buller by his groom James, and red spots came in his large blue eyes, and his cheeks grew paler as he listened; but as he never ceased whistling softly while he was being told, and laughed in his lazy, gentle way when the communication was concluded, nothing more was thought about it.

So the match was fully agreed upon, and Alice watched the tide coming in and going out, while Buller lay upon the sands by her side, and smoked himself to sleep. And she cantered over the downs on one of his well-trained horses, by his and fierce "Prince Rupert's" side in the afternoon, and she sang to him, of an evening, ballads of a somnolent character—and altogether she was very happy.

These soft natures—these diluted women and watery creatures—have a vast superiority over the stronger ones in one matter, and that is, in their much easier attainment of happiness. Their standard is but of mediocre height to start with, and their amiable reduction of it on the smallest emergency, to suit the circumstances by which they are surrounded—their wonderful adaptability to any niche they may be required to fill—their elastic variations of opinion to harmonize with the atmosphere in which they dwell—all these things give them golden advantages, which, as far as mere comfort goes, overbalance all their mental deficiencies.

Not that by this I mean to imply that Alice Leslie's weakness amounted to a mental deficiency. Her intellect reached—and just reached—the average, but it was softened by indolence in a great measure and by vanity, and held in check by a notion—a sort of unfledged, hazy idea—that in some things she did not quite receive her due. She had never once during her flaccid life, resented her brother's unkindness, and many impertinences—*not* because she liked them, or was indifferent to them, but because she did not know how to resent them. She always addressed her weird-looking parent as "dear mamma," but had that fondly apostrophised woman vanished into the clouds upon a broomstick (as from her appearance she might be expected to do at any moment), Alice would have been more sorry for the cloud's gain than for her own loss. Perhaps when all these things are taken into consideration, a stronger even than Alice might have been excused

for finding happiness in "such a trifle" as was Walter Buller.

The hundred thousand little disagreeables of home were now resolutely smiled down with what in another woman would have been resolution. The reflection that presently her lover would come with his shadeless face (a man's face with no shade in it is a fearful thing) with a compliment, or a bouquet, or a book, or a bracelet, would enable her to bear and forbear, with what some people would call "Christian fortitude," and others, perhaps more correctly, "dogged indifference."

She was very fond of jewellery. No possible amount of misery that was not bodily pain would have utterly crushed Alice Leslie, if you prepared her for it judiciously with a diamond ring, or an emerald bracelet.

In addition to her other pleasures—which were girlish and natural enough—when one bracelet had just been given, and another could not be conscientiously expected immediately, she had always the pleasure to fall back upon of writing a glowing account of her presents (and her lover incidentally) to her old school-fellow and bosom friend, Sybil Lyndsay. There was a delicious zest about this performance that made it almost as agreeable a thing as was the reception of a bracelet. Sybil Lyndsay was a young, proud, high-hearted orphan girl, engaged now in spending her slender inheritance in perfecting herself in sundry arts and accomplishments, by the transmission of which to others she meant eventually to work her way through the world. To write

Sybil accounts of her "nice presents, and brilliant future," was, therefore, one of those effects of contrast in which a liquified nature, such as was that of Alice Leslie, would unconsciously delight.

And so for a while she lived on in a blue bloom of happiness.

CHAPTER III.

“When thus he met his mother’s view.
She had the passions of her kind,
She spake some certain truths of you.”

“LEND us your horse?—there’s a good fellow, Buller.”

Fred Leslie made the request one hot heavy autumnal afternoon, as Mr. Buller came into the room with his usual lounging step.

“Yes, you can have her,” Buller answered, somewhat sulkily; he had evidently not quite forgiven Fred for annoying him very much on the preceding evening by a series of unpleasant remarks; in the course of which he had informed Buller that if it wasn’t for his father’s will, his mother would cut Alice off precious short. But that as it was, the money was to be divided equally, and whichever died first without children, his or her share was to go to the other. “Now don’t you wish I was dead?” he had concluded, and in an evil moment of frankness, Mr. Buller had replied heartily—

“Yes I do.”

“I don’t want *her*,” Fred responded, rather insolently; “I don’t want to ride your rubbishing, weedy-looking mare. Lend me ‘Prince Rupert;’ he’s a

horse fit for a gentleman to ride. I shall send Rogers for him."

"Why can't you ride your own pony?"

"Because he doesn't please to, Mr. Buller," said Mrs. Leslie, sharply: "have you any further objections to urge?"

"Not in the face of such a crisp-looking old witch as you are," Buller thought: "how I wish the days of ordeal by water or hot ploughshares were not over." But he only said "Oh, no,—certainly not."

"*Do* let him have 'Prince Rupert,'" pleaded Alice, meaning to be amiable.

"Thank you, Miss, I don't want you to ask for me," said the boy, rudely. "Come, Buller, shall I go to your stable, or send for him here?"

"He will start better from his own stable," answered Buller, who began to fear that his pet horse might get a graze of some sort with such an inexperienced rider on his back as Fred was known to be. However, for the sake of the quietness and peace he loved so well, apparently, he said no more on the subject, but walked out with the boy, remarking he would go and see him mount.

"Ungracious way he has of doing everything," Mrs. Leslie observed, as she raised herself up on the arm of her couch, and watched the receding figures of her son and future son-in-law. "Bless him!" she continued, fondly dropping the subject of her first remarks entirely; "he grows more like his father every day. Alice, come and read to me."

So Alice went and read to her mother, and her tones were so monotonous—for she was hoping, with

all her mind and heart, that Buller would come back presently, and relieve her of a task she loathed—that Mrs. Leslie was soon asleep.

The afternoon passed away heavily, hotly, wearily, and no Buller came. Alice began to feel petulant, cross, and disappointed. Seven o'clock came, and with it dinner. Mrs. Leslie roused herself, glanced rapidly round the room; then at the time-piece; then into Alice's weary, pale face.

"Is he not come home yet?" she sharply interrupted.

"No, dear mamma."

"Send down at once,—*at once*—to that man's lodgings, and hear whether my boy is there or not."

Alice obediently did as she was desired, and then sat herself down to wait for an answer in the little conservatory outside the hall-door. The atmosphere of her mother's presence was always doubly unpleasant when her mother was impatient. Mrs. Leslie was a woman who could brook no delay.

'Twere long to tell and vain to hear how the messenger came back with tidings that might be called microscopic in spite of the wordiness in which they were disguised.

Mr. Buller had gone out three hours before, leading "Prince Rupert," who was in an awful bad temper at having Master Leslie on his back. Mr. Buller had been heard to propose going up on the downs above the cliffs, where "Prince Rupert" could be given a breather. That was all they were to hear yet, for neither pedestrian nor equestrian had returned.

The shades of evening deepened, darkened mercifully, for the wildly, impatient watcher, the fiercely-loving mother at the window, for when they had deepened sufficiently to render objects nearly indistinct, a little crowd stopped at the gate.

They were huddled together in a dark mass, but still the keenly piercing eyes could distinguish that in the centre they were carrying something.

She beat her hands furiously together and then dropped her face upon them with what resembled a howl of rage and pain from a tigress, as she remembered she *could* not walk to that crowd at once. She was lame, she remembered, and she almost cursed the right foot that chained her there helplessly,—helplessly *now*, when she felt that the fate of the one who was dearer to her than her own soul was being brought to her slowly.

Small marvel that the crowd should have essayed to linger on its way. They had a horrible tale to tell to that wild mother, before whom they all trembled so violently, that they preferred bringing in the dead, crushed, mutilated body of her son, to speak its own story, rather than trusting their voices.

A dead horse and rider had been found amidst pools of their own still-warm life blood, at the foot of a cliff by a fisherman's boy, who had rapidly collected the horror-stricken eager crowd, which even a village can immediately supply. The rider was the son of Mrs. Leslie, and the horse was Mr. Buller's "Prince Rupert;" but Mr. Buller appeared not in the throng, nor was he seen again by a single denizen of that village.

She had bent over him kissing the mangled brow, and lifting the clotted crisp black hair up to her lips with wail and shriek, till nature had given way, and they who were around her had to tear a swooning woman from the clasp she was giving death.

Frightened as she had never thought it in the nature of things to be and live, Alice Leslie sat by her mother, cowering, shuddering, trembling, when she awoke.

She put her hands—her clenched hands—up to her forehead with a groan of such savage despair, as rang painfully on the ear of her child. She writhed herself round and up into an erect position in the bed, with a gesture so sudden, so wild, so abruptly fierce, that poor Alice cowered still more as she witnessed it.

“What have you done with my boy?” she said,—“with my Fred, the only one who loves me, the only one I love? Where is he? give him back to me: where is he?”

She looked eagerly around with a frantic energy, in which Alice’s bewildered exclamations of “Mother mother!” passed unnoticed. For a few blessed moments the bereft woman tasted a happy oblivion. Soon—all too soon—this stage was passed, and her eyes fell upon her daughter’s face, and with the sight of it came back remembrance.

“*He* was with him,” she screamed—“*he* has done this deed. I see him, the smooth-faced hypocrite, sending his vile horse over the brink” (she pointed in frenzied excitement to the corner of the room, and by her words seemed to conjure up a vision of what

had taken place). "Where is he?" she continued, turning round and laying a clammy hand upon the polished, round, white arm of the girl. "Where is he, that lover of yours—that man who has murdered my boy?"

"Oh! mother, mother!"

"Where is he I say? let him come, let him come. Let him come, I say, and hear that he shall lose the life he has sought to render more easy by murdering my boy. If there's a Heaven above us—if there is justice in the land—if the mother's vengeance has power to strengthen the mother's will"—and then Mrs. Leslie took an oath so horrible that the sound of it caused Alice to flee with a wild fear before which the former dread of the dead brother faded.

Mr. Buller disappeared from the place utterly, and revenge and the widow's purpose seemed to sleep. No one believed that he had been the cause of that terrible death, but the place got shunned. "Leslie's leap" was regarded as a fatal spot, and one it was not well to approach.

"If you marry that false-hearted coward who murdered my boy," Mrs. Leslie would say, when the insensible stage of her fever was over, and language was once more at her command,—“if you marry that man who planned it all, who planned to kill your brother in order to get all the money, I'll kill myself before your eyes, so that you shall be haunted till your dying day.”

And Alice would shudder strongly, and clasp a little letter closer that had reached her in the middle

of the night after that fatal leap, tied round the neck of a large Newfoundland dog, who unwisely, poor fellow, lingered about the house until Mrs. Leslie regained a little fictitious strength, when he was shot by her command. And then, after a time, Alice had proposed to her mother, that as they were not happy together, she (Alice) should go for a period to her old school-fellow friend, the orphan, Sybil Lyndsay.

Mrs. Leslie consented to the plan with the sort of harsh indifference that marked her manner in her calmer moments. The bereft mother had, since the fatal accident which had robbed her of her pride, her joy, and her hope, her son, grown bodily weaker to a degree that would have touched a tenderer daughter's heart to the point of a total abnegation of her own plans for a time. But Alice had never been a tender daughter; it was hardly to be expected that she should be one, considering the training she had undergone. And now the constant abuse of Walter, and the threats of vengeance Mrs. Leslie lavished upon him—though the vengeance was confined to threats—hardened the heart of the daughter yet more. She was only impatient to get away somewhere, where communication with Walter could be held. She was devoted to him now that her mother's hatred and antipathy raised insurmountable objections to the marriage. She trusted to Sybil's well-remembered tinge of romance to aid her when she had put Sybil in possession of so much of the case as it was well she should know. A check, a dread of some kind or other was upon Walter; he would not, he could not come forward and dare everything to

win *her*; therefore she resolved upon daring a great deal to win him. So eventually these mixed motives strengthened her eloquence to the point of enabling her to talk her mother into granting the requisite permission for her to "go and stay for a time quietly" with Sybil Lyndsay.

Sybil took a woman's view of the case. She thought it hard, cruelly hard, that two young hearts should be torn, and wounded, and suffered to bleed to death, because an accident had occurred to one who had done aught but further their happiness while he lived, and even in death had aided in blasting it. Sybil thought this unknown lover of her friend's wanting in many things unquestionably; amongst others, in manliness and courage, when she heard that under fear of the idle revengeful words wrung from Mrs. Leslie in her hours of anguish, he was anxious to eschew all things—his name, his place in the world, Alice's hand included. But Alice's tears about, and excuses for him, told in time, and at last Sybil allowed herself to be made a cat's-paw of. She suffered many an inward qualm, for she knew that Mrs. Leslie had a tacit reliance on *her* probity and honour, but she could not waken them rudely from what she really thought was "Love's young dream."

In vain she implored Alice to rather brave her mother's displeasure, by openly marrying the man whom, however that mother might rave against, she *could not harm*, since he "was innocent." In vain she entreated them to wait for "something" which might—which probably would soon occur to ease

their path. Alice could not be brave, and even could she have been, Walter would not have allowed her to be, nor would she wait.

They married under another name. They shackled Sybil with their fate and secret; they threw themselves upon her generosity, to save them from the evil consequences which would ensue should their marriage become known; and Sybil—doubting a little, but hoping the best—consented, and trusted that time would release her.

Soon came the news of Mrs. Leslie's death. She died suspecting nothing that *had* taken place, but providing for the worst, according to her idea, by decreeing in her will that, should her daughter ever marry *Walter Buller*, she should forfeit all her interest in her property. The wife of Walter Ponsonby, of course, claimed that property, and saw that will, and then, after once again binding Sybil down to that secrecy she abhorred, took leave of her old friend and of England, and went abroad for many years.

CHAPTER IV.

"It was an earthquake when
We awoke and found her gone;
We were miserable then,
We were hopeless and forlorn."

MRS. RIVERS completed her packing operations in a sort of frenzied haste, for which she herself could hardly account. She did not believe yet that she was to go away, and still she made preparations for doing so—preparations as complete and perfect as if the sad truth were a well-recognized, established, acknowledged, and not-to-be-deferred fact. She made up little packets of lace and jewellery, and ticketed them "For Helen: from her Mother"—"For Sybil: from her Mother;" and she wrote a little imploring note to each child that she should not be forgotten, and enclosed them in one to their father; and then she sat down to wait for him to come and tell her that this "going away" was a horrid dream.

For more than ten years the painful secret others had forced upon her had slept; it had now been thrust forward by one far more deeply concerned than she herself was,—thrust forward to *her* detriment.

"I *will* not be the victim—my children shall not be the victims—of their idle fears. I will tell

my husband, show him the letter, prove to him hat——”

“Prove to him what?” Might she not, in “proving” something to him, arouse that keen sense of justice in her husband which none knew better than she how strongly he possessed; and so, through this, might not the curse of blood be on her head eventually—on hers and her children’s? No; reunion could not be regained in the way her heart would have led her to take. She dearly loved her husband, but she feared that he would be ruthless to the man for whom she had lived a lie for twelve years; and she was too tender a woman to risk placing in the halter the neck of that man whom she had once assisted with all feminine skill and art in marrying to her friend.

Two hours had passed since she, pausing upon the threshold, had looked back with loving tearful eyes upon the familiar objects in the room she was about to quit. Those two hours had only deepened her resolution. She began to think her husband cruel and unjust as she sat there waiting for—she hardly knew what. Her little hands, unused to such work as packing heavy boxes and dragging them about, were bruised, and hot and red. She had nipped tiny pieces of skin off in her complicated efforts with refractory locks, and altogether she was very sore, and sad, and disappointed; and so she fell into the awful mistake of *pitying herself*.

Steps along the corridor! a hand opening the door! he was coming! coming. Not so fast, poor beating, fluttering wife! It was only her maid—her

own maid, whom her pride had not suffered her to summon to her aid—with a note and a message.

The message was to the effect that the General had taken the young ladies out for a drive into the country beyond Richmond, and that he would not be back till evening. The note corroborated this message, and further stated that his object in doing so had been to spare all parties the pain of a formal leave-taking. More than this, it put her in possession of the cause he had assigned to his banker (and through him to the world) of the separation, to wit, "incompatibility of temper;" and it told what sums she was to draw upon said banker for, and how she was to draw it; and suggested, finally, that Brighton should be her place of sojourn for a time.

She would have been in a better case, poor woman, had it been an error of her own for which she was to suffer, for then she would have confessed it with such loyal candour, and prayed so warmly for forgiveness, that it must have been granted. But the fault was not hers, and she felt that it was not hers, and this feeling hardened her; no, not "hardened," but stultified her. And the relapse she now suffered with the martyr-like frame of mind was an awful one.

She would obey him implicitly; she would go to Brighton till she could regain such command over herself as would enable her to bring all her powers of mind, all her witching charm of manner, all her tender womanly eloquence to bear on Mrs. Ponsonby in one last appeal. She determined to seek her; to go to this Waltham Priory, and force a personal interview upon the woman to whom she felt it would be

useless writing. "Surely," she thought, "through *her children* I shall touch her heart with pity for my own."

And then she went into their bedroom, and placed the little packets she had made up with such loving hands in such a position on their couches, that Helen and Sybil, kneeling there in prayer that night, would see them. The prayers would be well interrupted by the thoughts those packets would bring to the children.

A carriage had been ordered for her by her husband: it came at the appointed hour, and conveyed her away to the Brighton station. It was a bright, fine day, and the "many" were going to that fashionable watering-place; the train was very full, but the heart of the banished wife was surely the heaviest there—the sorest of them all.

She had not begun yet to put up those little minor miseries of what her friends and acquaintances would think, and say, and feel, and surmise, when they came to hear of this sudden rupture, and the dissolution consequent upon it. Her husband and her children were her world; every other person was nothing. But amidst the almost deadening grief, she did keep on wondering curiously how her children would feel and act when the knowledge that she was "gone away" dawned upon them.

"My patient, sweet-tempered Helen will bear it better than daring, impetuous Sybil will," she said to herself, with tears in her eyes, as she conjured up a vision, painfully palpable, of that scene of explanations between the father and the children. "Will he

tell them while they are out, or will he let them have their day in the country happily, and wait till he brings them home?" Then she thought of their little weary feet going up the long staircase, unrelieved by loving words from her, and of their finding her little mementoes on their beds; and poor Mrs. Rivers sobbed and cried bitterly as she thought of these things.

It was a dreary thing, that arriving *alone* at the Brighton station. She had not allowed herself the luxury of bringing her lady's-maid—a woman whom she knew to be attached to her; she had not allowed herself this luxury because she hoped that Ellis might be permitted to remain with her children—"to remain with them, and to talk to them sometimes about her." That was the humbly-worded petition she had made to her husband, in the letter she had written to him when she had finished her packing, and still sat hoping he would come and tell her that the packing had been a needless effort. Had she been guilty in any one way, she would have made bolder requests. As it was she could afford to be humble.

But it was a dreary thing arriving alone at a railway station, for the woman who, for so long a period, had been accustomed to see her wishes obeyed, and desires fulfilled, before she had well formed them. A ball rose in her throat as she thought whether *he* would speculate at all as to how she would get on. Would he think of her as the hour of arrival drew nigh, and recall that *last* time of her arriving at that same station, when her children were about her and

he was by her side? It was a dreary, dreary thing! The man with the satin-textured hands, and the pretty fool he had married, whom she remembered as being so faultlessly fair as regarded their exteriors, were not worth the throb of anguish that almost burst her heart as she stepped out upon the platform, alone!

The day had been *so* fine, and the horses *so* fresh!—Papa's own horses, driven by papa himself in his mail phaeton; and the country through which he had taken them had looked so lovely in its autumnal garb; and last, though not least, the Richmond dinner, partaken of with that zest with which children almost invariably partake of everything, whether better or worse, away from home—the dinner at Richmond had been so delicious, that they had scarcely had time to dwell much upon the one drawback to their pleasures, the absence of mamma.

They came home rather tired, but extremely light-hearted, and impatient to tell her everything; for General Rivers had been occupied all the day in solving the question of "how it would be best to break it to them," and he had not succeeded in solving that question to his satisfaction yet. He had mentally put the traitor-thought in irons that had arisen shortly after they started—the thought that perhaps after all the blame was his, not hers, and that his ebullition of military discipline and marital sternness this morning, had been nothing more than a rehearsal of the exhibition he was about to offer to the world.

The eager footsteps rushing along the hall before

him, the childish haste with which the door of the room in which they were usually sure of finding her—the morning room, in fact—was thrown open, struck severe blows at that dignity which the General felt must be maintained now or never. Heavier than the blows to his dignity, was the one struck at his heart, when he heard the young, clear, bell-like voices crying aloud “Mamma! mamma!”

He followed them in, closed the door, and picked up *her* letter from the table; then proceeded to make his communication.

“Your mamma is gone away,” he said, drawing them both close to him. “You must be very good children, and try——”

“Why?—what for?—where?” they both exclaimed, with a common eagerness characteristic of childhood, but with a marked difference of manner. Helen, the eldest, betrayed merely excruciating curiosity; the child edged closer to her father and opened her mouth in unconcealed impatience to “hear all about it.” Sybil flushed into crimson anger at having been “tricked” away from home, and at the same moment melted into tears at the cause.

General Rivers looked at his youngest daughter intently, and, through the tears welling up in those large dark-grey eyes, he read resentment against himself. She looked very much like her mother at the moment, and—well! he rather liked that resentful glance.

The question he had been endeavouring to solve all the day was, whether he should or should not

assign the true cause of that departure. He thought even now that he would read his wife's "last words" first. So he opened the letter, and in doing it the little notes fell out.

"Give them to me," he said, as the children sprang upon them immediately.

"This is for me, and this is for Ellen," Sybil answered, retaining her own letter, and looking her father undauntedly in the face.

"Sybil, my dear little daughter," he began, very kindly and sadly, "your mamma is gone away because she was very obstinate, and would not show me a letter that I asked her to show me. Those who are obstinate with me must *be punished*," he continued, waxing sterner every moment; "give me that letter, Sybil."

He had no intention of keeping the letter from the child; but his fatal passion for being "obeyed," aroused anew this morning after resting quietly for years, led him on to try and conquer the resolution he had not thought the child possessed before.

"The letter is for *me*, papa," she began, hoarsely; "and it's from my *own* mamma, that—I didn't—see—" She was nearly broken, he thought; her bosom was heaving with a storm of sobs; her little head drooped. He armed himself to complete the paternal duty he had charged himself with, and eradicate the seeds of obstinacy for ever.

"Give me the letter, Sybil!" he repeated, and his outstretched hand nearly touched it.

"I won't! I won't!—I'll burn it first!" screamed little Sybil, flashing up into sudden tearless wrath,

as with all her childish force she cast it into the fire, and then turned in her infantine defiance and looked into his face.

Dared, thwarted, disobeyed! a second time that day! Poor little, erring Sybil! you were doomed to harden your father's heart against the mother whose cause you were so injudiciously espousing! He rang the bell. "Go to your room," he said, when Ellis came; "Sybil, you have displeased me exceedingly."

"Here's *my* letter, Pa; you may have *my* letter." Helen would never get into a scrape through impetuosity. She too had been very anxious to discover from her mother's note where she was gone, and what for, and why, and whether she had promised to bring her (Helen) anything home; but she found that her doing so openly would be disagreeable to her father, therefore she waived the point with a flourish, after having soiled the letter through her surreptitious efforts to master its contents through the crevices of the envelope. But these efforts had not been observed; therefore she got patted on the head, and called a "good child," and had her letter returned to her after her father had perused it, and altogether had the satisfaction of feeling that she was a very worthy and virtuous member of society, and that Sybil was a nasty-tempered reprobate. That was the way Mrs. Rivers' "sweet-tempered, patient Helen" took the news of her mother's departure.

And upstairs in the sisters' room, deaf to the tender, tearful remonstrances of Ellis, who loved the child who bore her mistress's name best in the world next to that mistress herself—up here, a passionate, affec-

tionate child paced up and down, like an aggrieved little wild animal, sobbing and crying over the packet she had found, "with her *own* name in mamma's *own* writing," to the degree of rendering the jewellery rusty, and the lace dusky tear-stained. And there was wrath in that little bosom against the father who sat below, nourishing in his turn wrath against the self-willed inheritor of her mother's name and nature.

Helen almost forgot that she had anything to be sorry for, as she made her father's tea, and was allowed by him (unconsciously) to assume much importance: and, with her Pharisaical temperament strengthened and increased, she went to bed at last discreetly happy, despising poor Sybil, who now, from much rage and weeping, resembled nothing so much as one large fever-spot. Helen said every syllable, and sounded every letter, and made all her stops with exceeding correctness in her prayers this night. She felt so good, that she was not quite sure whether she was not paying the One to whom those prayers were addressed a compliment than otherwise. As for her mother's packet, Helen liked the presents very much, and wished—oh, didn't she!—that Ellis would go out of the room and leave her a candle, that she might try Ma's bracelets on. But Ellis seemed inclined to do nothing of the kind; she plainly was too anxious about the poor feverish, *wicked* child, who had gone to bed without accentuating any formal prayers, and who had cried herself to sleep over a scrap of paper bearing the already half obliterated words—

"For Sybil: from *her mother*."

CHAPTER V.

“A life of nothing is nothing worth.”

WALTHAM PRIORY stands in its own grounds of many acres laid out in lawns, avenues, wildernesses, and Italian gardens innumerable. The country around is beautiful, not so much from any combination of wood, water, hill, and dale, as from its rare cultivation. It is astonishing what superior scenic effects can be gained from a judicious arrangement of turnip, newlay, and other fields. Nature in Norfolk has been combed and brushed into something approaching to—if not indeed perfectly realizing—beauty.

The house stood on the site formerly occupied by a Priory; hence the name of the present edifice. When those scruples of conscience arose in Bluff Harry's mind which caused him (*vide* Thomas Ingoldsby) to “stamp and swear, and cut the Pope adrift,” the glorious mediæval building had been razed to the ground; and for years desolation had reigned around. In the reign of his second daughter, an Elizabethan structure had arisen, and this, in its turn, had fallen a victim to the wrath of the Cromwellites, after standing a long siege for “outraged

loyalty," and affording a temporary shelter to "outraged royalty." And now on the spot where friar and prior had bent pious knees, and made the surrounding air redolent with the odour of sanctity, sack, and malvoisie, a fine, square, handsome, white stone building reared its head, having on one side a huge music room with a pretentious glass dome, and on the other a colossal conservatory.

There was but one drawback to the house,—it ruined every one who lived in it. Its owner had given it up a long, long time ago; and it had since then been let to five or six courageous men in succession, who had come, in lighthearted reliance on their prudence and luck, and retired ignominiously from the county after a short period—no one knew whither—sadder and wiser men. Now, however, it had fallen into the hands of a man who spent his money about the place with an air of the supplies being inexhaustible, and the neighbourhood, therefore, pleased itself with the idea that it had *at last* a permanent acquisition.

Mr. Ponsonby—Walter Ponsonby, Esq.—had bought Waltham Priory, and the grounds appertaining thereunto, and come there to reside with a wife, two children, and an army of servants. The first thing that is done in every county when a new important advent takes place, is, to ferret out all that is known and surmised about the one who stirs up the normal stagnation. This, therefore, I need not say, was done when the new owner of Waltham's name was known. But all that transpired was, that he was very rich, that he had lived all his life upon the

Continent, and that he wasn't related to any one single branch of any "Ponsonby" family anybody could mention.

This was hard, cruel, unsatisfactory to a neighbourhood really anxious for information; but Mr. Ponsonby apparently was not such a warm admirer of the diffusion of knowledge as to contemplate, ever so remotely, enlightening anybody as to his antecedents. However, when great reticence and vast riches go together, the former is forgiven on account of the latter.

But there is another thing that in a Norfolk neighbourhood is harder to forgive, and that is, a man with a very large income and stables not keeping horses and joining the "Hunt." They do not like, they cannot like, a man who neglects this primary duty. If he can't ride what does he come there for? And if he can ride, why doesn't he keep horses? His non-relationship to any possible Ponsonby was a thing they could, would, and did look over. His lack of proper feeling as regarded those empty stalls in those magnificently ventilated hunting-stables, was a thing that made that county-side shudder with disgust.

They analyzed the cause of his profound disregard of the whole duty of man, and they found it in his supine indolence. A man who shambled about all day in a grey duffle dressing-gown and list shoes might be a very good fellow and worthy member of society, but he was no more the "man for Norfolk," than was Charlie O'Malley the "man for Galway," before his cousin had taken him in hand. With a

wholesale large-mindedness worthy of themselves, and their knowledge of the same, they attributed all his shortcomings in the field and saddle to his long residence in "foreign parts." It is a pleasing thing for one not gifted with the parochial mind, to witness the stolid determination with which the not-to-be-moved denizens of a neighbourhood impute all of evil that they discover or imagine in a new comer to his having "lived abroad"—if they learn the latter to have been the case. None but a man vitiated by a long residence in some water-drinking continental town, they felt, could have withstood invitations to champagne hunt-breakfasts. None but one enervated by a long sojourn under the "sun of the south" would have refused so constantly to pledge the members of the Welton Hunt in "the wine" of it. On the whole, in spite of his freely-spent money, and pretty wife, and the many festive gatherings he allowed her to institute, Walter Ponsonby, Esq., the "new man at Waltham," was not "popular," but rather the reverse.

He seemed to be a solitary man. Mrs. Ponsonby, a brilliant, well-preserved blonde of three or four and thirty, might frequently be seen in her handsome open britzka, driving through the adjoining assize and market towns. She was always accompanied by her children—by her aristocratic, noble-looking, young son, and pretty fairy-like daughter—but never by her husband. He preferred the solitude of his own grounds, and the ease of his duffle dressing-gown and list shoes, and the unexacting companionship of a cigarette. This last was another thing people found

it hard not to think ill of him about. The man who would smoke Turkish tobacco-dust rolled up in silver paper, was one it behoved them to form no hasty good opinion of.

But Mrs. Ponsonby was worshipped, imitated, admired, quoted, to a degree that would have caused a more sensible woman to hang her head, for shame of there being so much ado about nothing. Her dress, her manner, her dinners, her evening parties, were things that almost caused Mr. Ponsonby's offences to be entirely condoned.

Mr. Ponsonby, when brought to bay and forced by his wife, and other circumstances over which he had no control, to receive and entertain his friends, was all that could be expected of an Englishman, and desired of a man. Whenever he could, he shambled out of society, as fast as the list slippers, down at heel, would allow of his doing; but this was only a feasible thing in the case of "calling" society. Mrs. Ponsonby made him give dinners, and beguiled him into circulating about her saloon, whenever she had made large collections of people of an evening. And on these occasions nothing could exceed his affability; his efforts to appear enchanted at the presence of his guests were almost as subversive of genuine hilarity, as were the "spasmodic" smiles he forgot to render "regular," and the bewilderingly constant assurances he gave people of his being "exceedingly happy, delighted, and highly gratified to see them." The visitor welcomed with those three phrases, was tolerably certain to be by them (together with the light tremor he imparted to their hands—

for it was no "shake") reduced to a state of sober-mindedness bordering closely on dejection. On the whole, morning visitors at Waltham Priory had the best of it, for they saw the house and grounds, (Mrs. Ponsonby was sweetly amiable about showing the latter, for she had the most becoming of garden hats,) enjoyed the society of the graceful, pretty, lively hostess, and her two clever, engaging children, and were not rendered nervously irritable by Mr. Ponsonby's efforts towards putting them—and himself—at their ease.

Mrs. Ponsonby was standing at the door of her conservatory, with a long strip of paper in her hand, which bore a suspiciously (*torturingly* to the mind of her husband) strong resemblance to an invitation list.

She was really a very handsome—no, not that—but a very "lovely" woman, though "lovely" is a phrase that is more frequently applied with correctness to seventeen than thirty-four. Nevertheless though the latter was her age, she was very lovely.

Hers was a brilliant order of fairness; a complexion that is as vividly clear, white, dazzling, by day as by night, is extremely rare. Mrs. Ponsonby had it. By "white," I do not mean that she was very pale; her forehead was white, smooth, and polished, like satin, but the hue of the rose was well developed in her cheek. Her eyes, of a decided blue, were fine, large, but not particularly intelligent. Her mouth, of faultlessly pure outline, never led you to suppose that any particularly fine flower of speech would bloom forth from it. A most lovely woman

was Mrs. Ponsonby, with a magnificent figure, and good taste, adorning, and setting off the same, and (unless she was about to give a party) a most uninteresting one.

She was standing, as I have said, at the door of the conservatory, with the invitation list in her hand, and a request upon her lips that her husband would come away from the (to him) fascinating society of a recently re-potted camellia and a cigarette, and help her to write the notes.

As she poised herself on one well-booted little foot, on the step leading up into the conservatory, and grasped the frame of the door in order to support herself, she looked so well that her *posé* struck her small daughter as being worthy of imitation. Accordingly, little Alice went into the same attitude, and with the same touch of scorn as frequently appeared in her mother's voice when addressing her husband, piped forth her note of entreaty to Pa to be quick.

A boy of eleven or twelve came rushing towards them as they stood thus, but checked himself abruptly as he neared them, and burst into a genuine boy's fit of hearty, unrestrained, and most tantalizing mirth.

"Oh you little mocking bird—you're copying mamma," he began; "you can't do it, Alice, you're too little; mamma, there's a lady wants you. James is coming to tell you, but I ran faster; and I say, she's so pretty."

"There now," said Mrs. Ponsonby, pettishly, "now I shall be interrupted, and these invitation notes

won't be got off to-day. Why did James say I was at home? Who is it, Leonard?"

"I don't know; never saw her before; she's so pretty. Come and see her, Allie; it's better than copying mamma. Come and see her." And as his mother turned away to seek, and welcome the unwelcome guest, Leonard Ponsonby made a dash at his sister, which, that little lady being unprepared for, and her position being a perilous one, "upset her," literally as well as figuratively, and brought her to the ground and to tears.

"Serve her right, the monkey; she's as full of affectation as her mother," was Mr. Ponsonby's remark, as Leonard picked his little sister up again, and rapturously apologized for his offence with a generous warmth that certainly had not come to him by inheritance.

"I say, Leonard, my boy," he continued, "I've left my cap in the drawing-room; if I send James for it he will be clumsy and show what he is after, and I want to get out of this, for your mother's sure to bring her visitor out here; so get me the cap, there's a good fellow."

"Yes, sir," said Leonard, starting off, but turning back, he added, "Come in, *do*, father, just for once; she does look so nice and pretty."

"No, no; get me the cap."

It was an old Turkish fez—the only kind of head-covering Mr. Ponsonby felt comfortable in, when in his own grounds. It rarely left the pocket of his duffle gown; but to-day he had inadvertently left it on the drawing-room table.

Leonard walked in slowly. It struck him as being mean, this going in for the cap in order to assist his father in getting out of the way. It always had grated harshly on the boy when, in going round the grounds in company with his mother and her friends, he had caught sight through the trees of his father's red cap scudding away rapidly in another direction, or seen disappearing round a bushy shrub, a grey flicker as of a duffle gown. It had always grated harshly upon him, but never so harshly as did this purposely shunning one who had so attracted his favourable regard as had this morning visitor. It was mean, Leonard thought, to go rushing about your own garden into all sorts of nooks and corners, in an earnest endeavour to avoid your own friends; and Leonard Ponsonby hated a meanness. So thinking these things he walked slowly into the room.

Walked slowly into the midst of a scene that startled him, but before he could realize it he was taken firmly by the shoulders by his usually demonstrative mamma, and put with much force and little gentleness out of the room.

The beautiful visitor, the lady whose gentle loveliness had struck him so much, was sobbing bitterly, bitterly, and begging his mother to let her "tell him—only *him*"—something; and his mother, with tears in her eyes, and hot flushes on her cheeks, and a general air of feverish excitement about her that was not totally new to her son, was saying, "No, no, never; 'twould be destruction."

When Mrs. Ponsonby had entered her saloon five

or six minutes before, she had been surprised—but woe for woman's friendship!—very far from delighted to recognize in the lady, whose beauty had been vaunted by her own son, her old friend Sybil Lyndsay.

From her there had been fierce reproaches, for Sybil having been so imprudent, so “wickedly imprudent” she called it, as to have come at all. “Your husband—if nobody else—will know that you knew me before; and oh, Sybil! if it comes out, we are lost, lost.”

Mrs. Rivers had (miserable as she had been at leaving her home, husband, and children at all) felt quite sure that her ordeal would soon be passed. She had thought that it would only be to see Alice, to ask her to let her tell her husband (and her husband alone) the romantic episode in the past lives of the Ponsonbys, which rendered the concealment of his (Mr. Ponsonby's) former name necessary—she had thought that it would be “only” to do this, and that then she might return home with the tale, and the letter to verify it, and all would be well. But she was doomed to be disappointed.

“He must be a very bad-tempered man to want to know about that unfortunate letter—which I wish I hadn't written,” wept Mrs. Ponsonby.

“He is not anything of the kind; it's natural enough that he should be as he is about it.” Poor Mrs. Rivers felt that though in her secret heart her husband stood convicted of injustice and ill-temper, no one else must be allowed to accuse him of it with impunity.

"And there can be no fear of that idle accusation being renewed," she went on. "After all these years I should have thought you had ceased to tremble at shadows. Besides, *my* husband knowing it would be like my knowing it only. Oh! Alice, *why* did you write and make all this mischief if you won't help to remove any of it?"

Though Mrs. Rivers had made those little "scenes" with herself of packing up lace and jewellery, she had never for one moment contemplated a lengthened stay from home. But she felt now that if Alice Ponsonby still would not agree to that explanation being given to General Rivers, that she would be in a sad fix indeed.

"Why did I write; why indeed? I was mad, infatuated to do it; and if Walter knows I have done it, he will never forgive me. If he comes in and sees you here, Sybil, you *must not* for my sake let out that you have heard from me. Oh! oh! I hardly know what to do; your coming *has* upset me so."

"You have children—I saw your son, a lovely boy," said Mrs. Rivers, subduing all emotion as she made her last appeal, "do think of mine—my two little girls—without their mother—a word from you—such a little thing—would restore me to them; think of it, dear—one word—and do not be heartless to me."

"I am not heartless," said Mrs. Ponsonby, petulantly; "it's too much, after all I have suffered, to reproach me in that way. You must have been very clumsy to let him see the letter, and you've shown great want of tact in quarrelling with your husband."

But it is one of those tempests in tea-cups which are sure to blow over soon. At any rate, even if you have any feeling for *me* left, you must allow that it is better that you should be separated from General Rivers for a time, than that a suspicion should arise that we might find it difficult to quell, as to Walter's present name being his real one."

"But, Alice," said Mrs. Rivers, almost stamping with impatience, "the secret would be as safe—(not that I see any necessity for its being kept at all any more)—as safe with the General as with me."

"Don't you think," said Mrs. Ponsonby, suddenly, a little additional colour coming into her face as she spoke, "that he would think it strange, to say the least of it; and if he thought it *that*, are you sure that he would be less stern to a stranger, and one who has caused him uneasiness through you, than he has been in this matter to you, whom he loves dearly? And if you cannot answer for *this*, Sybil, still less can you answer for the consequences."

"What, *what* do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Rivers, hoarsely.

Mrs. Ponsonby rose, advanced to her friend, and placing her hands on her shoulders, whispered a few words in her ear. A few only, two or three words, but their effect was startling. Springing to her feet with her face now of one all-pervading ashy hue, Mrs. Rivers threw off the hand, the little white hand, that had been placed on her shoulder, with a strong shudder, as she said—"Heaven forgive *me* my share in it! Good-bye. No, don't say another word—I am

sorry, oh! more than that—that I came. Better I had borne my own grief patiently.”

“Give me your promise of secrecy afresh,” sobbed Mrs. Ponsonby.

“Till you release me—do not fear.” She seemed not to see the hand her former friend held out to her, as she turned to walk away. A fly from the railway station was waiting to convey her back, and as she was stepping into it, Leonard sprang forward to assist her. Unconsciously she shrank from the touch of the boy, over whom she had exercised such a charm that he had been waiting patiently at the door to render her that assistance. But as he raised his frank dark eyes reproachfully to her face, she conquered herself, and bending down she kissed his brow and asked, “Your name, it is not Walter?”

“No,” he answered, “my name’s Leonard.”

“I am glad of that,” she exclaimed, heartily. Then remembering how coldly she had parted with his mother in the first paroxysm of horror and disappointment, and mental anguish at the failure of her last appeal, she added generously, “And tell your mother, Leonard, that I sent a kiss to her through you.”

The carriage drove off. The boy stood gazing after it wistfully, and that was the last Mrs. Rivers and Leonard Ponsonby were to see of each other for twelve years. But long as the interval was, the vision of the gentle face, so winning in its refinement and beauty, never deserted the boy. Nor did the shadow of a doubt as to “all being right” which her visit had cast, ever utterly cease to darken his mind.

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CHAPTER VI.

"But ah! she had her mother's eyes,
And they were all to love and me."

A GAY, bright June morning, with the sunbeams coming down in resolute defiance of its being an English atmosphere through which they were shining; with warmth enough in their rays to allow of great-coats, muffa, and other garments, which render frost innoxious, being abolished. In fact *one* undoubtedly of the three summer days on which even continental authorities permit us to count.

The little fountains in Trafalgar Square sparkled merrily, and made the most of those not-to-be-relied-upon rays to which they owed all of brilliancy that they themselves possessed. Weary-footed pedestrians rubbed the dust out of their eyes as they held momentary mournful converse with one another in the streets, and declared that "these sudden changes" were "very trying." And ladies obviously revelled in the great fact that it was "warm enough to wear muslin dresses."

You may always get at the statistics of the hot and wet days of a past summer in this way. Consult some lady with a good memory, not "directly," but "indi-

rectly." Betray a tender interest in the number of muslins she bought, and the number of times she wore each, and you will have the hot days—the real summer *muslin* days—ticketed off as correctly as possible.

Amongst the carriages filled with floating cloudy textures that drew up on this special morning at the steps of the National Gallery, where red cloth, the majesty of the law as represented by policemen, and an awkward looking awning, marked the fact of the Royal Academy being open as usual. Amongst the many equipages bearing hither youth, beauty, age, ugliness, and fashion, to look at each other and (incidentally) at the pictures, was one containing three old acquaintances.

It was a handsome open britzka, drawn by a couple of strongly, yet slenderly built horses, of that rare dark brown which is so nearly black. Not a better appointed equipage drew up at those steps, nor better broken, bred, trained horses; for the male occupant of that carriage had a keen eye for such—and indeed most things.

Twelve years had passed since a foiled, sorely-aggrieved woman had pressed a kiss upon the bold, bright, unsullied brow of a boy, to whose parents she owed all of sorrow that she knew. Twelve years had passed, and in revolving over his head had changed Leonard Ponsonby from the handsome, bright, spirited boy into a far handsomer, more spirited, thoughtful man.

Unlike his father in name and nature, he was equally unlike him in person. A fine, well knit, nervously active frame; an appearance of energy which

never slept; a determination of manner which carried invariably all he cared to carry before it. Eyes of that dark steel hue which may be black, or blue, or anything, you care not to analyse the colour that dwells in such depths. These eyes never fluctuated, never wavered under the gaze of mortal man. A massive forehead, high, remarkably high on the temples, where the hair waved back in a silky profusion of what was half curl and half mere elastic undulation. A strongly marked nose, a mouth partially concealed by the moustache, which yet outlined it sufficiently to show that it was good and in unison with the rest of his features, and a shade over his face for which I can find but one descriptive phrase, and that an insufficient one, a sort of warm pallor.

Undoubtedly a very handsome man was Leonard Ponsonby, and as he sprang out of the carriage, and turned to assist his mother and sister over the perils of the splasher and step, a bystander would have been justified in settling decidedly in his—or probably “her”—mind, that he was a very engaging one also.

Mrs. Ponsonby was good-looking still—“lovely” no longer—but a very good-looking, florid, portly matron, bearing in her person unmistakable evidence of ease, comfort, and good living. But she lived again, in a revised and improved form, in the person of her daughter Alice, whom we saw last in tears at the downfall of a most successful imitation of her mamma.

A tall, brilliant blonde, with large, bright, blue eyes, telling—so said some envious friends—a tale of belladonna; delicate aquiline features; a complexion in which the rose and lily reigned equally,

and a general showiness of manner and springiness of gait, that caused every one to look at her. Perhaps she might have been considered more elegant had the showiness been kept under a little ; but through it she found that she always commanded a great meed of admiration and attention, and as she liked these things she did not attempt to keep it under.

On her growing up into young ladyhood, Mr. Ponsonby had shown himself utterly regardless of his duties as a man and a father, and had obstinately refused to give Alice the benefit of a season in town. He would not go into the London world ; that they could have pardoned : he would not let them go without him ; and that was an offence that neither mother nor daughter affected for one moment to do anything but deprecate wrathfully. Alice began to be very much afraid that she would be compelled to marry one of those country gentlemen who were subjected to her charms all the year round ; for the eligible nobleman of the neighbourhood weakened the impression she made upon him occasionally, by perpetually going up to town. And Alice Ponsonby disliked exceedingly the idea of marrying a man who would stay in the country all the year round, for she knew, by the small experience she had had, that it would be only for her to appear at military balls to be a great success.

Now a small bit of the silver lining was beginning to appear. Leonard, after travelling on the Continent for a few years, had come home, and declared he would be a barrister ; and on his being entered at the Middle Temple, and consequently residing in Lon-

don, his father had no further excuse for thwarting the wishes of the ladies who rendered life unpleasant to him down at Waltham. "Leonard could accompany them everywhere; Leonard could see to his sister; Leonard (this was a clincher) was so unlike him that no one could suppose him to be Walter Bul-ler's son." Finally, Mr. Ponsonby, who had now sunk into a state that was half abject nervousness, and half gloomy moroseness, gave his consent, and the mother brought her daughter and her britzka up to town; hired a furnished house in Eaton Square, and trusted to fortune and her son to get her into society. The son had done a little—fortune nothing as yet—towards this desirable consummation. Leonard had introduced the Honourable John Leighton to them, and the Honourable John Leighton had there-upon prevailed upon his mother,—an ancient dame of perhaps unimposing appearance but much power,—to call upon them, and render them such services as one with an assured position alone could render.

The Honourable John Leighton lived, as the story-books say (and would that other things in life would bear quoting as often, and were as never-tiring as the "story-books!"), all alone with his mother nine months of the twelve, in a remote castle near the Land's End, and the other three in town. Now I am conscious that naming him Leighton, and giving him a place in Cornwall, may by some people be considered one of the weak things in my story. He should have been "Tre," or "Pol," or "Pen," on the authority of the old ballad. But on *my* authority—surely the best in this case—the fact of his being a "Leigh-

ton" must be accepted in conjunction with his being a Cornish man.

Though twenty thousand persons might not have expressed themselves desirous of information as to "why" he should die—provided such a contingency had been contemplated—John Leighton was a Cornish gentleman of a good old genuine stock.

Nor had they done so, would curiosity have been ill-placed; for had the great Destroyer laid him low, the last of a gallant race, a good landlord, a good son, a good neighbour, a conscientious magistrate, a rising man would have been lost to the world. These are qualities frequently possessed in "divisions," I doubt not; but the combination is sufficiently rare to make the one who has achieved it a man of mark.

The only fault in his character was, that he had too much amiability of heart and gentleness of disposition for the part he was cast to play in life. He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, who had an overweening idea of her own rights and privileges, and a corresponding laxity of belief as to other people's—her son's especially. She was very fond of her son, and she liked to seem to govern him with a degree of outward severity that had as yet crossed none of his plans, and that therefore he permitted her to indulge in freely. She wished people to imagine he was under her thralldom, because she thought that his being so would redound to *his* credit. "The Leightons had always been good sons and good brothers," she said, "and John had only herself to exercise these qualities of family goodness upon;" therefore she taxed them to the utmost.

The man who in his native county led the justice of it, and was always followed—and safely followed—in the course he took by his brother magistrates; the man whose simple, but always strongly-asserted sense of “right” made him equally the friend of the poacher and the poached upon; the man whose natural unaffected eloquence, powerful gifts of always daring to say “what he thought,” and “was right,” carried with him half the House at least. This useful country gentleman, this important member of Parliament, dared not ask a friend home to dinner in the house of which he in reality *alone* was master, and over which he permitted his mother to preside.

A report was prevalent among his acquaintances that his mother dealt out his cigars to him, one by one; but this was a libel upon *her*, for she did not like the odour of them sufficiently to take them under her special care. But it was true that in most things, through the weakness *she did not feel*, she ruled her son pretty absolutely. And so it was that not only Leonard, but John Leighton himself, thought great things were done for them when he persuaded his mother to call upon Mrs. Ponsonby and Alice.

Now it was a speciality of Alice's to be always bored, *blasé*, and contemptuous of all things, when she was not either dancing or flirting. To do her simple justice, it must be granted that she not only did both these things “well,” but that she did them well at the same time. No garrison belle, after a severe training at every regimental *soirée*, every “quarterly ball” at Woolwich during a whole season, could revolve round a room faster than Alice, and maintain,

at the same time, a more unwavering, unceasing flow of small-talk, "small," very! but "talk," nevertheless. "She was always in such splendid training," said her admirers, "and could go the pace better than any horse on the course, provided she had good ground, and was held with a steady hand," which of course was a most gratifying testimony to her merits, and meant that she could waltz faster, and in better time, than any girl in the room, if the floor was well waxed, and her partner's arm a strong one.

But now, at the Royal Academy, she was very tired, and bored, and exhausted with all things, and inclined to be very touchy with Leonard, who had not, as he half promised, brought his friend Mr. Leighton to accompany them.

So Alice sank upon the cushioned seat in the centre of the North room, and surveyed the pictures through her jewelled eye-glass, and wondered if there were many artists present, and what they thought of the bend of her arm and throat; and Leonard, with his mother on his arm, walked round through the throng.

They paused—a rare thing—with mutual interest before one painting, and this "one" not of a class which usually commanded much sympathy from Leonard. The picture contained two figures—portraits evidently—the figures of two young girls. The seated one charmed his attention but for a moment, though there was a striking prettiness about her which might surely have won more than a casual glance; for in the deep eyes that looked out with such mournful steadiness into the eyes of the beholder, in the exquisitely refined, sorrowfully shaded face of the standing

figure, Leonard Ponsonby recognized a likeness to the lady who had pressed her lips upon his brow long years ago ; and Mrs. Ponsonby recognized the features of one who could be the daughter of Sybil alone.

Like as it was to the face which had charmed him—the first face that had ever “ charmed ” him—and that is an era in a life—he acknowledged in this physique a passionate earnestness that had been wanting in the other. There was a glow—subdued, but still there—under the mournful tone which the painter had rendered so truthfully, that you felt it only required the match of circumstances to be applied for that glow to develop into a flame. It was a rarely beautiful face, and a rarely lovely form, and it brought a look of fascinating admiration into the eyes of the man whose mother had turned in the meanwhile to the catalogue and seen it described as one of “ the daughters of General Rivers.”

“ Come along, Leonard,” she said, “ portraits are always uninteresting.”

“ You must let me see who it is first,” he answered, rather absently, extending his hand for the catalogue.

Mrs. Ponsonby did not quite care for her son to be informed on the point, so she said, “ Oh, it’s nobody,” and affected to turn over the leaves with rapture, in order to find out what the great allegorical piece that made her eyes ache might be about.

“ You must let me see, mother ; ‘ nobody ’ will be ticketed at least.” He smiled and took the catalogue from her hand unresisted. She knew by experience that when Leonard smiled—though there was nothing cynical in that smile—that he was a little more de-

terminated than usual, and to conquer her his usual determination sufficed.

He read the names aloud, and just then his sister coming up animatedly (she had caught sight of John Leighton making his way through the throng at the door), exclaimed, "Why, surely those are the pretty girls who live a door or two above us in the square, and who go out every day with that stiff-looking old father of theirs."

"Don't you see a likeness, mother, a strong, a very strong resemblance," asked Leonard, "to a lady who came and saw you years ago, and conquered me entirely, and went away—the one about whose visit you never would gratify my curiosity? Tell me now, who was she?"

Mrs. Ponsonby had forgotten; how could Leonard expect her to remember such trifles? She really didn't know whom he meant. But Leonard spared no pains in refreshing her memory, and Mrs. Ponsonby, finally, after plunging recklessly into the mire of falsehood, was compelled to take a clean spring out of her difficulties by saying, "Oh! she recollected now; that was Mrs. Rivers."

"By Jove, the mother of these girls?" he asked, interrogatively. "And you say they live in the square you're in, Alice. Leighton," he continued, as his friend advanced to them, "you know every one—your mother does, at least—do you know General Rivers?"

"Very well indeed," answered Mr. Leighton; "they are very nice girls, his daughters, great favourites of my mother's even; but she can't forgive the General

for having separated them from Mrs. Rivers, who is as sweet a woman as ever lived ; though Mrs. Rivers herself will not have him blamed, and, queerly enough, contends that he is quite right."

"Is she indeed all that you say?" asked Leonard, eagerly; "I thought so. I have seen her. But what is the cause?"

"Incompatibility of temper," answered Leighton; "nothing in the world else. They meet frequently in society, and then he is always as polite and attentive to her as if their relations were not at all impaired. But he won't let the girls live with her at all; he says he has seen the misery of the father and mother setting up rival establishments, and the children being with both alternately. My mother reproached him furiously on the subject once, and he replied to her in his old-school, stiff, courteous way, that Mrs. Rivers had her course in her own hands; that by waiving a point she had held to, with what he might call wicked tenacity, for years, she might at once take her former position in his house and heart, and that he declined hearing anything more on the subject."

"And so do I, Mr. Leighton," said Mrs. Ponsonby, sweetly. "If people won't be comfortable when it's their duty to be, I have no patience with them."

"Very bad for the girls, isn't it?" asked Alice, in a sprightly tone; "for of course no one will like to marry them. It's a pity too, for they're rather pretty." She then took Mr. Leighton's arm, and thoroughly enjoyed the time at the Royal Academy.

CHAPTER VII.

Two mothers verify the old adage about every man thinking his own geese swans.

A DELICIOUSLY cosy interior, with a warmth and richness of tone about it that would have delighted the eye and heart of an artist. What matters that the house in which this room was, stood in one of those gloomily grand streets over which the abodes of your opposite neighbours cast shadows deep as death? Those glowing velvet curtains—ruby velvet, from the looms of Utrecht—glorified the lights from without, which had to pass them in making good its entrance into this room. The walls were not papered, they were panelled in oak, dark with age and polished to the brightness of a mirror from much rubbing. Above the deep carved ledge which ran entirely round the room, marking the division of the upper from the lower panels, hung many portraits,—glorious, voluptuous, sleepy-eyed beauties, soul-subduing as when first immortalized by the brush of Sir Peter Lely. Aristocratic, slender-handed dames of an earlier date, with the melancholy in their faces Vandyck alone could give; courtiers of a day when courtier was so strongly impressed upon a man who

was one that it spoke not alone in garb, manner, lineament, and bearing, but in the additional sharpening and refinement of the features, and in that mighty "power of the eye" which fascinates us as we gaze on the works of the great master.

And over the mantelpiece, in the place of honour, above all the ancestors, adherents, partisans of the house, hung the vivid resemblance of that true gentleman, and false king, who paid with his life the forfeit his want of tact imposed upon him. And on this canvas, as on every other where we see him portrayed, the noble thoughtful face and the matchlessly mournful expression of those subtly eloquent eyes, appeared to appeal to posterity to deprecate the fate he suffered.

There were some fine old cabinets about the room, on which stood goblets and vases of Venetian workmanship, speaking visibly of an acquaintance with the fifteenth century. They did not look in the least out of place in this English oaken room; they were no recent acquisitions, but had belonged to the family through so many centuries that they had become identified with it. And there were couches, magnificent as to colour, noble as to proportion, but of that order of upholstery architecture which precludes the possibility of one's reclining at ease upon them. Their backs were straight, which was bad enough; they were also carved, which made matters worse. In addition to these there were some modern chairs for comfort, and some modern footstools to tumble over. There were also a centre and writing-table of mediæval aspect, and over the latter,

which stood against the wall, hung a small Venetian mirror in a heavy enriched silver frame, supporting girandoles: the candles in the latter were kept continually burning over a sort of little shrine erected on the table below. The little shrine contained relics that were very sacred in the eyes of Mrs. Leighton—hence the conflagration. They consisted of a small painting—unimportant as a work of art—representing a Leighton, who probably never existed, refusing knighthood at the hand, or sword, of a gentleman whose crown was all-a-one-side (probably from excess of emotion); a bullet which had been extracted from the back of the throat of the late Mr. Leighton after he had been beguiled by too much port, and the persuasions of some fire-eating friends, into fighting a duel (and which, to tell the truth, was always painfully suggestive to his son of the possibility of his revered parent having turned his back upon the foe), and a withered bit of something which Mrs. Leighton always proudly informed the few whom she honoured with her confidence, “was a white rose presented to her by the hand of his majesty George the Third (after he lost his reason, it was presumed by the few). Such were the relics, and I doubt not they were quite as valuable as many others that have little shrines to repose in and wax candles burnt over them.

But far more interesting to gaze upon than the relics, more pleasing to the eye than even that glorious glow of colour which made this room so soul-subduing a sight, was the figure that reposed so gracefully in one of the more modern chairs. From the brim of her daintily delicate bonnet of violet

and black lace, to the hem of her floating garment of violet silk, all about this woman was in unison with the tender sweetness of her pale sad face. Altered as she was by time, and by sorrow more than time, Mrs. Rivers retained much of her beauty. There was, to be sure, that indescribable hue over her face, more pallor than paleness, which years alone give, and give alone when they are not happy ones. The soft hair reposed on a forehead still free from wrinkles, but it was streaked slightly with silver, and was scantier than of yore. The compression of the lips, that was half resignation and half determination, had induced deep lines around it to settle permanently. The cheeks were thinner, less rounded than a happier woman's of that age would have been. But the eyes—the eyes were the same. No, not the same exactly; they had gained in cloudy depths, in intensity, in feeling, they almost seemed to have gained in colour, they were now so darkly violet, and they alone would have made a face, altered even more than hers was, still marvellously charming.

Opposite to her, in one corner of one of the hard couches, sat an old lady in a long dress of black silk, with no crinoline under it, and no flow about it. It fell around her rigidly in hard straight lines, and was supported in its determination of being ungraceful by a hideous little cap of real old point, tied tightly under her chin.

She had on a wig of that pure brown which asserts so defiantly at once that it is a wig and nothing else, and she had a hard, iron-grey complexion, a long aquiline nose, and a firm mouth, and slate-coloured

eyes that saw through you in no time, and that were not given to softening much.

But their expression was soft enough as she looked at her visitor, for Mrs. Rivers was a great favourite of Mrs. Leighton's.

"Well, my dear," she said, in answer to her guest, "I can't blame you for coming up and going about where you will meet them, because it's only natural that you should wish to see your girls; but I know I wouldn't gratify anybody's nasty, overbearing, tyrannical spirit in such a way."

To do her justice, she never did gratify any one's nasty, overbearing spirit, save her own.

"He is not what you say," pleaded Mrs. Rivers; "besides he is right, quite right. He is very kind, and brings them to call upon me when I come up to town, and allows them to correspond with me."

Mrs. Leighton bridled, shook her head, patted the fingers of one hand rapidly with the fingers of the other, and gave other signs of dissent and disapprobation; but she reflected that she had conversed on the same subject very frequently and at great length with Mrs. Rivers, therefore she said nothing, for she knew that if she opened her lips to speak again about him, the words that would flow therefrom, with reference to General Rivers, would not be of a complimentary nature. Indeed, in the unrestraint of domestic discourse with her son, she was rather in the habit of calling General Rivers "a fool."

"You see," she said at last, "that he has had your girls painted and stuck up at the Academy? What has he done that for?"

"To please Helen, I believe," returned the mother ;
"they are lovely portraits, are they not ?"

"To please Helen !" sneered Mrs. Leighton ; "well, I am very glad you don't tell me that it was to please Sybil. I tell you what it is, my dear," pursued the old lady, with that sort of nervous rapidity of utterance that marks the thing to be said to be not of such an entirely impromptu character as the speaker desires the hearer to suppose it—"I tell you what it is, my dear, your Sybil and my boy cannot do better, I have just thought, than marry each other ; eh, what do you think ?—there need be no more 'separation' between yourself and *that* child, at least, if such a thing were."

Mrs. Rivers coloured and looked confused ; she felt all the force of the compliment the proud old hard west-country lady desired to pay herself. She had great respect for John Leighton—his wife's would be a pleasant fate enough, she doubted not ; but for Sybil—for beautiful, richly-gifted, high-souled Sybil—the mother's heart desired something higher and more brilliant.

"You are very kind, old friend," she said, "very, very kind ; but I must make no plans for my child, you know." Then with a natural curiosity she continued, "Do they meet often ?—has he given his heart to *her* ?"

"Oh, by no means," replied Mrs. Leighton, drily. Fond as she was of Mrs. Rivers, the latter's mode of taking her proposition was displeasing to her : there were very few women's daughters to whom she would have offered her son—"Oh, by no means : I said to

him the other day after she had been here, 'Why don't you make Sybil Rivers an offer, John—she's a girl fit to be your wife, and that's more than I would say for another girl in London?' He replied with some mawkish sentiment about not 'being worthy of her,' as if men ever thought of that if they care for a girl!"

Now Mrs. Rivers was very sweet, gentle, and amiable; but she was very proud—no truly gentle, amiable woman is without the quality of pride. She was nettled considerably, her face burned with one deep crimson glow of indignation, on being told by this blunt old lady that her daughter had been offered to a man theoretically, and rejected by him. Constant, good, stanch old friend as Mrs. Leighton had ever shown herself, Mrs. Rivers was quite ready to quarrel with her now.

But she was not a woman to quarrel plebeianly; *she* quarrelled by a gradual deepening of her already intensely deep eyes, and by a more perfectly modulated and more thrilling articulation.

"Your son is all that you as his mother could wish him to be," she said, rising, "but I dream—that is all I dare to do—of another future for my dearest Sybil," and then old Mrs. Leighton felt very sorry for what she had said about "men never caring for a girl when they could say they were not worthy of her." She saw that she had roughly touched a tender chord, and pained a woman who had suffered too much pain already in life for it to be given her heedlessly.

"Do not go yet, my dear," she said, refusing Mrs.

Rivers' hand in farewell, "I can't spare you yet; do not take offence at the awkward wording of a speech that was kindly enough meant. I have something else to tell you, while we are on the subject of your children and their portraits. Young Ponsonby (Sybil started) was here last night, and he did nothing but talk about the 'standing figure'—it's Sybil, of course—and of his having seen you once long ago when he was quite a boy, and of the impression you made upon him. Do you know anything of the family? I ask, because there is a daughter, who has commenced making eyes at John, and he thinks her a beauty, and will not see that she is full of affectation."

"I know so little of them," answered Mrs. Rivers; "the daughter I have never seen—that will prove to you *how* little—and Leonard only once. He was then such a noble-looking boy I have never forgotten him, any more than he has me, it seems. What is he like now he has grown up?"

"Well, a nice young man—a very nice young man indeed," answered Mrs. Leighton: "if he hadn't that sister I dare say I should think more highly of him; having that sister, the less he comes here, and the less John sees of him the better I shall be pleased."

"Do you know his mother? has *she* told you that she knew me formerly?"

"No, I don't; and she will not have many further opportunities of telling me anything. I say I do not know her; but I have called upon her, and she has been here bothering. John got me to call by asking me to do so before Leonard. All the time she was

here she was occupied in praising everything in the room, and the girl was flattering me in the most barefaced and stupid manner. I wonder how long she would keep it up if she got John to marry her?—she would have me out of the house in half an hour, I expect.”

“I hope John will beware of her, then,” said Mrs. Rivers, laughing: “what is she like?”

“A tall young woman with a quantity of bright hair, and eyes that would be very well if she would let them alone,” responded Mrs. Leighton, who was very hard on every possible future “Honourable Mrs. Leighton” who came within her ken; “it is my opinion they will drop out some day: she is always jumping and skipping—not like a school-girl, I allow that—but in a sort of swinging elastic way. She’s a great fool, too,” continued the old lady, calmly, “for she tries all she can to please me; and if she wasn’t a fool, she would think that I should know she would not do *that* if it was not for the sake of my son.”

“And what does John say about her?”

“He takes everything very easily, you know; I have my suspicions about his thinking more of her than he says, for not only was he at the Academy with her yesterday, but he went to the Opera with her last night. I shouldn’t have known that, if her brother had not come here for him, ‘according to appointment,’ he said. It was then he spoke about you.”

“You cannot expect John *always* to consult you, my dear old friend,” said Mrs. Rivers; “he will marry wisely and well, I am sure, whenever he does marry; you must grant him freedom of choice.”

"He shall have it, he shall have it, without a word from me, I assure you," replied Mrs. Leighton. "To be sure I waited up for him last night, in order that I might tell him Miss Ponsonby was a nasty, intriguing girl, but he answered, 'My dear mother, you take perverted views of young ladies in general, and of Alice Ponsonby in particular,' so I shall drop the subject. Mr. Ponsonby, the brother, seems to be very anxious to get introduced to your daughters."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Rivers, with a heightening colour.

"Yes, very; and John has promised to manage it for him, if he can: curiously enough, his mother has taken a house close to the General."

"She must have forgotten that 'twas there she addressed that letter to me," Mrs. Rivers thought to herself. "Her son—*their* son—anxious to get introduced to my daughter! How will it end? how can it all end?"

CHAPTER VIII.

In which the case comes on between Friendship *versus* Love.

THE morning-room in General Rivers's house had ceased, naturally enough, to be such a pleasant haunt after she who had been its soul had left it. General Rivers seemed to find aught but comfort in this room, where, through her, he had for long years found so much; so he deserted it for the gaunt dining-room, where there was not so much to remind him of her at every turn. And the girls, on growing up, made their sanctum in a much smaller, brighter apartment upstairs.

This little room of theirs was just such a one as girls delight in; it contained everything they wanted, and was consequently always in that state of glorious confusion which is so essentially, luxuriously comfortable. Those unaccustomed to the navigation of this room, would have been apt to founder utterly in their endeavours to avoid Sybil's littered writing-table on the one hand, and Sybil's equally untidy work-table on the other; for at the same time the obligation was laid upon them of not treading upon a splendid little King Charles spaniel, who made a point of never getting out of anybody's way, called Zinga, or an Italian greyhound, who writhed graceful acknow-

ledgments when you called "Bella." In addition to these mantraps and pitfalls, they had numerous pots containing ferns in all the shady corners, and others containing brightly-blooming plants in the sunny spaces. So that, as I said before, the navigation of this little room was a difficulty to the uninitiated.

But it was delightful when you understood it. Then you would appreciate the tact which had placed that little couch in that exact position, where the lights from the window by day, and from the lamp by night (the latter being a fixture), should fall vividly on your book alone, leaving your eyes to enjoy comparative shade. Then you would think lovingly of those arrangements over which you had tripped during your novitiate; lovingly of the little dogs always ready to come and lick your caressing hand, and give you all their animal wealth of sympathy when you were dull; tenderly of those flowerpots which contained such sweet odours; pleasantly of those writing-tables, which were *within reach* wherever you placed yourself, and so never made you alter your determination of writing a note by being awkward of access.

The books, too—there were books everywhere. You bruised your head on something when you laid it on the velvet squab; you investigated, and found the cause in "Shakespere," or the last volume of "London Society," or something else equally reinvigorating; and others, with those well-known little yellow labels upon them, were all about and around, in a constantly replenished profusion that proved the

communication between No. 4 Eaton Square, and the establishment in Museum Street, to be uninterrupted.

Truly a delightful room, with everything in it that the heart of man or woman could desire—literature, comfort, objects of art, the sweet odours of flowers, chairs of the easiest, and little dogs!

It was more especially Sybil's room. There had not been, since the moment it dawned upon the child's mind that he was not only "stern" but "unjust," much congeniality between Sybil and her father; so she had come to regard her little room as a sort of stronghold—a sanctuary, where she could be free from the weight of his presence. Here it was that she brooded over those real and fancied wrongs of her mother's, which clouded her young face with sorrow; and here it was that the feeling which always chained her back from being "good friends" with her father grew and strengthened.

There is no more delightful thing, for those who enjoy it, and no more socially pleasant thing to witness, than that "friendship" which exists between a father and daughter thoroughly attached to, and at ease with each other. Between them there is such quick sympathy, such perfect understanding, such charming confidence, that every other class of friendship—save that between husband and wife—seems indeed "dull, tame, and unprofitable." Where the sympathy, the perfect appreciation, the confidence is, the compact is one of rare happiness; and rarely enjoyed it is by those who are fortunate enough to know it.

But such was not Sybil's lot. He was her father,

loved as such—a good, kind parent, but not a “friend” to his child. They were unsympathetic to a degree; and this want of sympathy from those we live with constantly, must eventually exercise a hardening influence on us. Sybil did not harden to the “world,” or herself, or humanity; she only hardened to her father.

He saw the crust forming over that part of her nature which pressed against himself when she was a mere child; and he attempted to dissolve it, as people do pearls, by pouring vinegar upon it—mental vinegar—in the shape of a too active supervision of her manners and customs, and extortionate demands of affectionate and dutiful observances towards himself. And these Sybil submitted to and paid; but the resentful look came into her eyes often when she was a child, and now she was a woman the sorrowful one abided there.

In order to gain unbounded confidence in a daughter, a father must frankly place it in her. “Trust me,” works both ways. The plan will never fail with a true woman; and with a designing one no other can succeed.

But he had neither placed the confidence nor gained it; and so now, with such rich soil close to him, he had to be contented with the barren ground of the companionship of his eldest daughter.

Sybil, with all her mother’s beauty, had more than her mother’s intellect; and this intellect had been worked and acted upon by a more passionate nature and greater depths of soul.

Mrs. Rivers had sorrowed deeply, and wept bit-

terly over her separation from her children. Sybil would have sorrowed as deeply, have wept even more bitterly—and then have turned to and acted very differently to her mother. She *would* not, because she *could* not, for twelve years have stood what Mrs. Rivers had endured. She would have broken down all sorts of barriers with her woman's strength of love and wit, in order to regain the confidence of her husband and the guardianship of her children. As it was, though the line of conduct pursued by her mother was an enigma to her, she kept herself constantly on the alert, in the hope that in time some broken twig on the road of fate would indicate what had gone before sufficiently for her to work a restoration. Guided by that twig, she was determined that she would go on, she cared not through what difficulties or dangers, till she found a path by which the beautiful, gentle mother whom she worshipped, could return in all honour and happiness to her husband's house.

Little marvel that her portrait on the walls of the Academy should have attracted the regard of such a beauty-worshipper as was Leonard Ponsonby. Her hair was massively wavy; its colour was precisely similar—forgive me the commonplace simile—to that of the light treacle known as “golden-syrup;” that is, it was brown with golden dashes of radiance in large masses upon it. A neat, close arrangement of this hair never suited her, therefore she always wore it in a loose sort of halo turned back from her face, and concealed in its fastening under itself behind. The violet of her eyes was so deep that it

tinted with the same hue the almost too transparent skin beneath it; and the lashes which shaded these eyes were so long and heavy, that they swept like a rich silken fringe upon the cheek, and then again took a curve upwards. The line of the nose, and the exquisite contour of the lips and chin, and the polished roundness of the cheek—all these graces of feature she inherited from her mother; though not with them her mother's delicate fairness of complexion. In this, in the eyes of many, she would have been found wanting, but in mine, there is a sort of nervous bloom (by which I am far from meaning "agitated blushing"), a warmth, a vividness of colouring, an alternately passionately pale and passionately glowing face which puts that of the fairest out of court; and to this organization a slightly dusky shade of complexion belongs; and of this order was Sybil Rivers's.

A very graceful, firm, slender figure bore aloft this lovely face; and she possessed the bounding grace of an antelope, kept "well under" by the high breeding of a lady. Not too tall, with an arching throat, and little rounded shoulders, and the prettiest of hands and feet, Sybil Rivers was altogether precisely the style of woman to arouse Leonard's admiration, even had he not discovered in her a strong resemblance to the vision of his boyhood.

She was sitting now—not working—but with a piece of embroidery in her hands, in order that they might not appear conspicuously idle in comparison with Helen's. Helen was busy with a neat desk before her "making up her accounts," and writing little satin-laid notes of invitation to some kind of

festivity with which the General was about to indulge them. Helen was always busy, and active, and neat, and trim, and prompt, and smiling. "All that a daughter should be," her father was in the habit of asserting to the chosen few with whom he condescended to discuss his children and their merits.

Mr. Leighton was there, comfortably ensconced in one corner of one of the cushioned nooks of this sweet little feminine retreat. He was admitted on the strength of his being such "a very old friend" (such a *valued* old friend Helen would say), and of his being "only" John Leighton, Sybil would add.

Sybil had always liked him ; from the time the soft easy-mannered youth had shown himself strong as his gruff old mother in smoothing *her* mother's path to their frequent meetings, Sybil had liked, respected, and felt warmly towards John Leighton. But liking, respect, and warm feelings do not in the heart of a young, impulsive, deep-natured woman build up the fairy edifice we call love. He was "only" John Leighton to her ; a man to be fallen back upon in utter truthfulness and undoubted reliance, in any little minor difficulty in society, where a brother would have been useful. An old friend for whose death she would have wept heartily in undisguised sorrow—for whose misfortunes (had any threatened him) she would have been unfeignedly grieved. But not one to be loved with the whole-hearted, passionate, unresisting devotion that would pervade her being, that would flow in a stream powerful enough to

tide her over all of life's sorrows and difficulties, when her *heart* leapt up in answer to an appeal from the man who could touch it.

And he recognized—partially—his inability to do this. He shared to a fuller extent than she would ever dream of, his mother's sentiments respecting Sybil Rivers. From the time—years ago—those violet eyes had smiled kindly and encouragingly on a shy boy's attempts to free himself from the quagmire of confusion, they had represented to him all that was pure, noble, beautiful, and true in woman. He watched her as she grew up—and grew, alas! more *friendly* with him each year—and felt as the beams of every sun that rose and set seemed to ripen and deepen those charms of mind and body, which in their immaturity even had been powerful enough to conquer him, that to gain the hand of this woman would be the trial for which every atom of his strength would be taxed at some time—and taxed, he feared, in vain.

He had gone on day by day deferring the asking which might win him so hard an answer. Strong in everything else, he was weak, weak, in this; he did not hold to the metrical assertion that “’tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.” Better to him seemed the uncertainty and the dream, than the stern waking up that might—that would probably—come when he broke the spell of silence which—maintained—kept up those warmly familiar relations between them.

So he had gone on through too large a portion of his life for it ever to be blotted out, and now it had

come to this—that (Sybil's heart still ungained) another man whose love-winning powers he could not ignore had questioned him about her, in tones, and gazed upon her inadequately limned charms, with eyes in which admiration of such a sort was so rife, that a word, a breath, a look would fan it into a fierce flame of love.

Leonard Ponsonby had not seen Sybil yet, but again and again had he gone to look at her portrait, and——! Well, the love that is greatly ideal is not always the faintest. He was very anxious to get Leighton to realize his promise, and introduce him to the original. He longed to hear the most casual observation from her lips, in order (so he said) to assure himself as to whether her voice was as sweet as her mother's. He drove Mrs. Ponsonby wild with his frequent allusions to the family whom of all other she dreaded. He made Alice pale with fretful spleen, for she feared that he would "talk John Leighton into thinking more about Miss Rivers." Alice quite believed in the sheep-walks men's minds are supposed to run in; she thought if Leonard tinkled his bell too often that she would not be strong enough to hold Leighton back from following him. And despite the drawback of his resident mamma, Alice would have been very sorry to see John Leighton wandering away from the path that led up to a proposal to herself.

So while Sybil sat with the apology for work dangling down from between her dainty fingers; while Helen cast up her accounts and made fairy-like rows of figures with a neatness and accuracy worthy of the "cause"—the "cause" being partly the expenditure

of the household over which she exercised supervision, and partly a desire to impress this extremely eligible old friend with sundry characteristics of hers with which it was just as well he should be duly impressed ; while the flowers bloomed brightly regardless of the fiery (mental) air around them, and the little dogs yapped and barked as they disported in their dreams over those gentle "happy hunting grounds," which would, from their gentleness, give joy to a Spanish spaniel and Italian greyhound, John Leighton sat ensconced in a corner, revolving that still *unasked* question, and Leonard Ponsonby's probably greater promptitude.

CHAPTER IX.

In which "Love" is nonsuited.

"THOSE look like the baits usually thrown out to induce people to come and bore and be bored, around a dining-table, for a few hours in this pleasant month that would be so much better spent in the country."

Mr. Leighton made the remark, and as he spoke, he picked up one of the little notes Helen had just written and directed.

"Yes," she answered, "you are right; papa has a dinner on Friday: you will not fail us, I hope."

"Am I one of the happy invited?"

"Of course you are; why, we—that is papa regards you as our right hand." Helen lifted her eyes quickly to his face, hoping that the remark would have called forth a correspondingly warm expression in his, before which she would have been compelled to "droop" her own. But the expression was not there—for her at any rate; his eyes were bent on Sybil, with an earnestness and intentness he would have been slow to show before any third person had he been conscious of it. He was asking himself how should he be generous—no, simply just to Leonard

Ponsonby, and essay to fulfil the promise he had made him.

He was not a man to palter with such a question when it presented itself to him.

"Sybil," he said, "an old continental friend of mine—not an 'intelligent foreigner,' don't mistake me, but a young Englishman who did me good friendly service, many a time and oft, abroad, is very desirous of being introduced to your father, and to *you*. May I bring him with me on Friday?"

He did not ask the favour—poor fellow! how it cut him to have to ask it at all—of Helen the manageress, but of Sybil; nevertheless it was from Helen the assurance that his request would be taken into consideration came.

"I am sure you may bring a friend of *yours*, of *course*; however, I'll go at once and ask papa, and bring you his hearty acquiescence."

Helen rose up and passed from the room with her bright everyday face, and light step, and smiling cordially at him as she spoke. *Why* could he not gather the flowers that bloomed so brightly for him? *Why* could he not find *the* happiness of life in the calm, well-regulated mind and affections of this girl, who was ready to bestow all she had of both upon him?

Who does it?—who does this wisely discreet and proper thing? Who loves—whose love is worth the having—the *one* woman in the world whom it would be prudent, and economical, and judicious, from every point of view, *to* love? The wife—the true "help-mate" of the good truly pious rector—is not *the* one, perhaps, oh! reader, for whom his heart has beat

most wildly. The lady who assists the merchant prince in dispensing his superb hospitality, is not the one who has swayed his soul most violently. The country gentleman who brings the most perfect of Lady Bountifuls down to adorn a neighbourhood, has had in *other* days *other* views. Ah, me! "Time was, Time is;" and in that speech of four words imagined by one keen genius for another, we have the plot in its development and denouement, of the lives of the larger half of humanity.

"Who is this friend of yours? tell me," Sybil asked, trying, out of politeness, now she was left alone with him, to "make talk" for John Leighton.

"His name is Ponsonby. Oh! by the way, he told me he had seen your mother once; have you ever heard her mention him?"

No: Sybil never had heard him mentioned. Was he agreeable, intellectual, nice?—in other words, was he what might be expected from a friend of his—Mr. Leighton's?

Sybil quite roused herself to ask this. Hearing that he had seen her mother, that he knew her mother, gave him a new interest in her eyes.

"He's a very different kind of fellow to me," Leighton answered, candidly; it *was* a hard matter for him to speak the truth about his friend: "a very different kind of fellow indeed. He has a chivalric kind of romantic, un-nineteenth century-like character, that renders him what ladies call 'interesting.'"

"And what men call 'feeble?'" she asked, quickly; "tell me, is he what men call a 'boudoir pet?' a

man to be made a 'lion' of by conversazione-giving ladies, and rather eschewed by men in consequence? tell me."

Her anxiety to hear about him, even though he was unknown to her, grated harshly upon John Leighton; still he would give him (Leonard) all his due. He did it bravely.

"He is one of the noblest-natured fellows I ever met," he said; "as far from being a 'boudoir pet' as he is from being 'feeble.' If—" (he gulped as he said it, but he feared nothing more than having to reproach himself with ungenerosity)—"If I had a sister, Sybil, I should give her with pleasure to Leonard Ponsonby."

"What a man!"—she commenced, all a woman's spirit of admiration for aught that is "noble" aflame in her eyes—"What a man he must be to have won such friendship as yours! I *like* to hear one man speak in that way of another! *What* it says for both! Bring him here, John, you need not fear for the welcome we shall give Leonard Ponsonby."

How lovely she looked as she spoke, leaning forward in her gracefully energetic way! How words of praise, encouragement, approbation from *her* would stir a man to the innermost depths of his heart, to go on and do better and better things, and keep alive the noble interest such a wife would feel in him! He thought this, as she leant forward with her soul gleaming in her eyes—as it always did when she grew animated. And then he thought, "Why should he defer *that* question any longer? she could but say him 'Nay.'"

He did not add the last clause of his sentence in the happily reckless spirit of Sir John Suckling, when he sang

“If she undervalue me,
What care I how fair she be?”

He said it rather as a man with no lack of courage should. All would be very blank to him if that answer was a negative—“blank to *him*,” and that would be the worst. It was in this spirit that he thought “she could but say him nay,” he meant that he *alone* would suffer; things would be as bright for Sybil as heretofore.

To *think* you will ask for a favour to be granted, and to ask for that favour are two widely different things. The merely mechanical part of the proposal offered difficulties to John Leighton. He felt sure that Sybil would look surprised even—happy chance—should she ultimately accept him; and he shrunk from seeing that surprise, for he knew that the heart of a woman who loved him would have taught her what was coming a long time ago.

He drew the chair on which he was seated nearer to Sybil's couch; how easily that chair rolled him on to his fate! The little spaniel roused himself from a dream of chicken-bones, and came up in a whimpering burst of fussy, canine hospitality, to welcome the nearer approach of John Leighton, whose advent an hour before he had—like a perfidious and lethargic host—forgotten. However, he came up now and placed his slender black and tan fringed legs upon Mr. Leighton's knee, and yawned and rolled his eyes and—plunged Mr. Leighton into the midst of the

dreaded "situation" forthwith, unconscious agent that he was.

His little shining head was up in the air close to his mistress's hand, and the caress she bestowed upon it was a thing of course.

In one moment the dog's head and the lady's hand were clasped with a most loving and tender clasp; the head withdrew itself immediately, with a vindictive little snap; the hand remained partially paralyzed.

"Sybil," he began, "dear Sybil!" and then he paused; not another word could he utter in that moment of suspense.

Most gently she withdrew the hand—the clasp that held it was a strong, not a restraining one—and it would be hard to say which of the two suffered the most.

"I am so sorry, John, I *can't* say anything of that sort, but I am miserable. You believe me, don't you?" The girl spoke abruptly, for the passionate tears would have fallen had she not dashed her words out. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes; I am sure you are sorry for me, Sybil; but is there no hope?"

"Do not ask me," she said, piteously. "You ought to be loved so much, so freely; it is my misfortune that fond as I am of you—for *I am very fond*—" she frankly continued, "that I do not love you as you ought to be and *will* be. Forgive me, *do* forgive me!"

Like a true woman she felt humbled by her inability to respond to his sentiments; for the first time in her life her glorious little head was bowed

with shame. The thought that *will* rise—despite the claptrap that has been talked about the “feminine elation” that is experienced at “an offer”—the thought that *will* rise was saddening and crushing her, “What right had I to win this best gift from a man to whom I have nothing to offer in return?”

“What has become of John Leighton?” Helen asked when she re-entered the room ten minutes after Sybil had pleaded so humbly for forgiveness from the rejected lover and dear old friend.

“Gone,” answered Sybil, laconically.

“So I see; but why? Here I have come back laden with a message from papa. He was to be sure and bring his friend on Friday. Now I shall have to write him a note.”

Helen was sorry he was gone, but rather pleased than otherwise at the necessity that existed for writing him a little note; she liked writing to John Leighton; she had the reputation amongst her special friends of writing “charming letters;” she therefore felt it to be no waste of time to expend the most careful calligraphy on John Leighton, for she anticipated nothing short of inditing herself into the first place in his affections.

In her present frame of mind Sybil found Helen an awful worry; it is one of the peculiar attributes of mediocrity to be worrying even while essentially useful to those around it. We are tolerant and gentle, patient, forbearing, and complacently long-suffering to the moping and mewing idiot, or the simple fool. But mediocrity has no strong not-to-be-disowned claim of painful inferiority upon us; it is

as good in most things as ourselves, except in such minor details as imagination, feeling, thought, &c. It *does* everything better than ourselves probably—crosses its t's with accuracy, gets up early in the morning, never loses a train, or anything at the wash. Passes its examination by dint of "what it is sorry to say" we do not possess, "application." All this mediocrity does, but it *is* a worrying thing to get up with, and breakfast, dine, and sup, and go out for walks, and to the Opera, and picture-galleries—to say nothing of the International Exhibition—with. The tea loses its flavour, and the dinner its savour, and the trees their greenness, and the prima donna her charm under its influence. It keeps our accounts and us straight in the world, and is altogether the most useful ingredient in the queer compound called humanity; but when it too largely pervades the atmosphere of our hearths, homes, and lives, it is harder to endure than it can ever be brought to believe.

Helen, with her small, pretty forehead, and clear hazel eyes, and hair of the same colour, always glossy and neat; with her full, pink, nicely-rounded cheeks, and her dress fitting her trim, active figure to perfection, was the type of mediocrity—and as such she was particularly irritating to her sister in her sister's present frame of mind, as already said. She kept up a running fire of questions, as to why, and how, and where John Leighton had gone, till Sybil—her eyes suddenly opened to some things—began to think that if John Leighton had preferred his request to Helen, Helen would have behaved better

than she was inclined to think she herself had done.

But the little commonplaces worried her as only commonplaces can. She sadly wanted a friend now—not one to talk “sympathies” with—but a friend who looking into her eyes would read there that the soul wanted rest, repose, not cross-examinations. She wanted a friend who would not drag her into the realms of small conversation, but who would leave her in silence while silence pleased her, and answer her when she cared to speak without that martyr-like air which proves that the spoken-to one considers herself a victim to caprice. Such a friend, in fact, as Helen was not, but her mother would have been. And now more than ever did Sybil Rivers long for that mother to abide with them once more.

CHAPTER X.

“Maiden fashioned so divinely,
Whom I worship from afar,
Smile thou on my soul benignly,
Sweet! my solitary star.”

A DINNER-PARTY to a girl unless she has anticipations of special interest connected with herself and another respecting it, unless she is very fresh to, and fond of, society, or unless she is sure of a neighbour who won't use himself up over the soup and be speechless the rest of the time; unless these things—or some of them—“are,” a dinner-party to a girl is a thing of tedium. General Rivers was, in right of his military rank, in right of his claims of family, breeding, wealth, and education, a man in an undoubted good position, and the society he moved, or rather “marched,” in was the best. But not the less were his dinners soul-wearying and yawn-engendering both in the future and in the act of realization to his daughter Sybil. Not only were the dishes, but the guests, cut invariably after the same pattern. She never had any special interest in connection with them; she was fond of, but not fresh to, society, and it always fell to her lot to be placed next to one of her father's dreariest and most distinguished

friends. Gray-moustached veterans abounded at the festive gatherings; men who had directed charges, and led forlorn hopes, and turned the fate of armies and empires. Sybil respected the profession in which her father stood so high, and which he loved so well; she esteemed his old friends, and admired them for their former deeds of gallantry and bravery; but the constant repetition of the story of "how that flank movement that some one had suggested to some one else would have changed the fate of the field" is a thing to pall upon one after all.

For a long time she had been accustomed to regard John Leighton's appearance as a slight break in the clouds which always settled over these dinners—for General Rivers made a great point of the Honourable Mr. Leighton partaking of his portly hospitality whenever it was offered and he was in town. It never fell to John to take Sybil down to dinner, but it nearly always happened that he was placed opposite to her, and she was always sure of finding the clever slate-coloured eyes ready to answer her glance with the quick sympathy that is often found existing between brother and sister. He had such an intelligent face, too, that she delighted in watching it and in contrasting its vigorous expression with the vacuous faces of those who had stiffened mentally and bodily through routine.

But now she could count on this silent interchange of sentiments no longer; she felt, with a sharp pang, that a companionship that had been very pleasant—though unappreciated while it lasted—had closed to her for ever.

"I wonder will he come," she thought, as she gave the concluding touch to her toilette, and prepared to descend and be dull—to the drawing-room. And then she thought, "Yes, he surely will, because he was to bring that Mr. Ponsonby." The opportune recollection of Mr. Ponsonby gave her a revived interest in things in general, for it always gave her extreme pleasure to meet with any one who knew her mother.

Dress is a trifle! maybe so, but how many, how very many of the important events in the lives of most of us are inseparably connected in our minds with the flutter of a ribbon, the fall of a shawl, the line of a dress, whose special hue—be it blue, gray, violet, or anything else,—brings back very vividly that happiness or misery of the past, which has exercised the influence which has made our "present" what it is! In after years, when events that might have been supposed to obliterate such trifles, had passed over their heads, Leonard Ponsonby and Leighton could recall, with a distinctness which rendered it almost tangible, the exact colour of the dress she wore, and the precise line it took, as Sybil opened the drawing-room door and stood before them.

She had dressed—as she always did—"becomingly" on this evening; she had put on a robe of many skirts and much fulness, of various shades of blue—the darkest shade being at the bottom, and it merging away into nearly white at the waist. And with this she wore strings of pearls upon her arms and neck, and twined in and out in some marvellous manner known only to herself in the loose soft masses of her hair.

She came through and stood before the two young men, and the flush which rose to her brow as her eyes for one moment met Leighton's, was taken—very naturally and ingenuously—by Leonard as a tribute to acknowledgment of, a nameless something in himself. Not knowing his friend had proposed to her the mistake was a natural one, for Sybil, to hide an embarrassment she could not avoid feeling, infused a rather more than conventional warmth into her greeting of John Leighton's friend.

Every hope was fulfilled, every dream, every ideal realized. She was fifty times more charming than her mother and her portrait had led him to suppose she would be. Leonard bowed low before the many-shaded dress and his fate.

He was not a man to conceal his feelings, more especially when they led him into the paths of such perfect taste as admiration for Sybil Rivers evinced. He stood by her chair in that usually horrible interval before dinner when all is dull, tame, and unprofitable, and clearly he did not find the time long. Mr. Leighton from the other side of the room and the middle of a political discussion in which an old officer who entertained strong and correct opinions on every subject on earth, imagined he was "pumping him," had the pleasure of observing that the two people he had just introduced to one another were congenial, and this was of course as highly satisfactory as it was rare.

Yes, they were congenial; he had been to all the places Sybil had *most* ardently longed to go to, and seen the things for a sight of which she had always

panted, and drank deeply of those delicious draughts at the fountain-heads of art in Italy for which she had always thirsted. He painted her little vivid word-pictures of life and artistic society in Rome, during the soup, and he idealized the too material dinner by sketches of how Capri looked when its deep sky of blue was irradiated by the sun, or softened by the moonbeams.

Art-life in Rome! southern sunsets at Capri! long delicious days on Como! gondoliering exploits in Venice! student hours at Heidelberg! All these with him and through him Sybil enjoyed a taste of as she sat bounded on the one side by an old colonel of dragoons, and to the right by Leonard Ponsonby. By the time it came to the dessert Sybil was in full conversational swing of greater breadth and freedom with Leonard than she had ever deemed it possible she could be with any man. Yes; they were congenial. John Leighton saw the fact, recognized its truth, and tried not to look at them. Once and only once he met Sybil's eyes, and then they saddened with a quick sympathy for him, then drooped with a prompt consciousness in answer to the dawning passion.

Mr. Leighton was compelled to keep a double guard upon himself—in fact to guard himself at all points. He cared too much for Sybil not to wish to avoid paining her by allowing her to see anything like suffering or reproach in his face. But his mother was there also to be guarded against; the keen old lady had a “dawning consciousness” of something, and the penetrating glances she now

hurled at Sybil, and now flashed upon her son, discomfited the latter considerably. But for all this, and though Helen silently tendered her little services as watcher, and warder extraordinary, over him—for all this he could not refrain from a constant observation of the progress his friend and rival was making.

“And how old were you when you saw mamma?” Sybil asked when he had brought her across the Channel, landed her safely and taken her to Waltham, his description of which made Sybil declare emphatically that “it must be a sweet old place.”

“How old was I?” he responded thoughtfully; “let me see, it is twelve years ago I should think,—oh, I was quite a boy, quite a boy, but I assure you, Miss Rivers, I remember her perfectly. I have never forgotten her charming loveliness. I recognized your likeness to her in the Academy the other day;” he continued, in a lower tone, “my memory has been the means of my gaining this introduction.”

There was nothing to blush at in this; Sybil was annoyed with herself as she felt the colour rising freely.

“Mine is not considered—I mean I do not consider mine a good likeness. My sister’s is excellent—do you not agree with me? look at her now, she is looking exactly as she does in her portrait.”

“I should think she always looked the same—that is,” he continued, hastily correcting himself, “I should imagine she does not vary much—she must always look sweetly pretty.”

“She always does,” answered Sybil, but he saw

her smile, and knew that she understood thoroughly the spirit of his first remark, and did not altogether disagree with it.

"You are very much like your mother," Leonard went on; "I hope I may be fortunate enough to meet her while she is in town. Leighton tells me," he continued, in an explanatory tone, "that Mrs. Rivers *is* in town."

Yes, Sybil told him, she was. And in the girl's darkening face he read truly that Mrs. Rivers not being *there* was where the shoe pinched.

"*My* mother is in London too," said Leonard, after a short pause, "for the first time for years."

"Is she indeed? have you a mother living? I hardly know *why* I am surprised, but I imagined somehow or other that you were alone in the world."

So I am, Leonard thought, but he only said, "My father and mother are both alive and well, I hope—my father is down at Waltham now. My mother came up to town on my sister's account, for so far from being alone in the world, Miss Rivers, I have a sister."

"Have you?" Sybil asked with animation; it is astonishing with what interest a girl regards the unknown "sister" of a man she is at all inclined to like. The merest mention of "my sister" is sure to arouse her. Is this sister his *beau-idéal*, perhaps, of what a woman should be? is she one to be liked? has she much influence over her brother? how does she exercise that influence? and, above all, is she like him? Sybil asked herself all these questions, as Leonard Ponsonby mentioned his sister Alice.

"They will remain in town for a month or two, or till my father makes them go home, which I should not be surprised at his doing any day, for he must pass but a lonely time of it at the Priory in their absence. They are in a house close to here, in this square, in fact;" and then he gave Sybil the number of the house his mother had hired; and Sybil longed to say she would call upon them—but dared not.

Mr. Leonard Ponsonby, delighted as he would have been could he have imagined such were Sybil's thoughts, felt himself restrained from the expression of any desire to effect an introduction between his own family and this perfect specimen of noble womanhood by his side, by a dire uncertainty as to how the latter would be impressed by his frivolous sister Alice. Unfavourably, he feared.

Now for the first time in his life he felt, with sorrow, that he could not enlarge on the topic of his family with anything approaching unto warmth. A morbidly misanthropic father; a worldly-hearted, weak-minded mother; a vain, flighty sister; these were not ones to talk to Sybil Rivers about. To have enlisted her sympathies, interests, on their behalf was a thing that would have given him a rare delight—for he loved this girl already—but he knew they were not of the calibre to do this of themselves, should she ever know them; therefore, he would not speak about them at all. But he felt the necessity of having some assured neutral ground of sympathy; though his family failed him his friends did not. He had two whom with all his warmest eloquence he de-

lighted to honour. And the name of one was Roland Nepean, rector of the village of Waltham, and the name of the other was John Leighton.

With unconscious half-reparation for the grief his love for her would cost his friend, he placed before her by a few powerful strokes that noble character of Leighton's to which she had been so long accustomed, that the edge of her admiration for it had got blunted. *He* sitting opposite with eyes now riveted on that sparkling, kindling face, little thought that *he* had any share in the additional brilliant animation.

And then he told her of the other. Of the life the polished educated gentleman, the profound scholar, the deep thinker, the ornament to society the most brilliant, led at Waltham. How there by his unaffected piety, by his grandly practised Christianity, Roland Nepean gathered to himself all hearts as does the little steeple of a village church the cottages surrounding it. This was better than the discussion of "what that flank movement might have effected," and so it was felt by Sybil to be.

CHAPTER XI.

Maternal forebodings.

EVERYBODY noticed it; of course everybody did; to commonplace people it had too much the air of a commonplace flirtation to pass unnoticed. Mrs. Leighton planted Sybil directly they reached the drawing-room with the straightforward question of what she had been saying to young Ponsonby, and what young Ponsonby had been saying to her. A question Sybil answered with the utmost sweetness and discretion.

The General, when the gentlemen involved themselves in one mass, in which conversation being general nothing could be heard, made it evident that *he* had remarked it by saying to John Leighton, "Seems a nice young fellow that! who is he?" And when John Leighton, with severe accuracy, gave him the information he asked for and a great deal beside, he seemed very well satisfied. The stern old father looked very kindly on the lovely child, to whom he fiercely trusted *no other* man would ever prove "stern," when he saw the same shyness come into those violet eyes, as Leonard once more eagerly sought her side,

as had once, years ago, come into her mother's when *he* addressed her.

The introduction once effected, the acquaintance of this girl who stirred his heart so powerfully once formed, Leonard took special good care that it should not drop. He had found *the* excitement his heart had always needed now; and he joyed over it, and made the most of it.

He had tried many things before, young as he still was. He had tried friendship, literature, a course of severe philosophy, and art, and of these, friendship alone had not failed him. In his very young manhood he had panted for a "something" he had not, and imagining this something to be literary fame he essayed to write a novel. He filled it with the wild dreams of a clever boy, and the half-formed visions of a deep-natured man; he filled it with all the poesy floating about in his brain at the time; he put into it spasmodic, brilliant dialogue, flashes of wit, and a great deal of beauty. But he left out one thing—the pervading breath of love, for he had never felt the passion yet.

He had waited for its appearance and for the remarks its advent would call forth with the eagerness twenty-one alone can feel. He had affected to scorn some timid words of half-praise bestowed upon it by the first few reviews in which it was noticed. And he had suffered to the total dissolution of all future literary plans when a critique, of which the following is the substance, had appeared in the very journal he had been accustomed to cite as the embodiment of all the talent of the day.

The critic commenced with a classical quotation, and then—after writing a graceful roundabout paper over it—asked why so many unnecessary things were constantly and perseveringly done by the larger portion of mankind. He kindly stated that he did not find fault with those who did absurdly uncalled-for things, *if* the absurdly uncalled-for things affected themselves, or their own immediate friends—alone. But when the feebly-thrown pebble agitated the waters of the world, in circles beyond those of the witless thrower's "own immediate friends," then it became a duty to inquire into the cause of such disagreeable effects. He expressed a kind hope that the author of "A Late Atonement" knew why he had undergone the physical fatigue of writing down the words which a house to which it would be unnecessary to allude—but which, he might say, was *not* famed for the sternness of the stuff which usually emanated from it—had published under the guise of a three volume novel. But "the critic" confessed he had been utterly unable to do so himself, after a perusal of what it had been his hard fate to have placed before him. He also hoped that the author understood something of his "plot" himself—for no other person could be found who did understand it. He—the critic—had laboured under the impression that a novel must possess certain qualifications; that if it had no plot to be elaborated, it should at least have character, incident, or description. But since the appearance of "A Late Atonement," he was sorry to say that this hitherto firm ground was shaken under his feet, for it possessed neither

plot, character, incident, description, nor even half a page of metaphysical disquisition; of such minor things as interest, pathos, humour, sense, it was destitute to a degree that cast a soft halo of pity over its author. Still it must be a novel, because it was sent forth into the world by a house that never published anything else. Finally, he expressed a fervent hope that Mr. Mudie would not be a loser by the few copies he had rashly ordered, but he (the critic) contemplated that contingency with a serene belief in its not being a remote one.

This was the substance of what, in a much more elegant guise, caused Leonard to drop all further efforts after current fame, with the remark that "no cad should ever have another chance of cutting into him." Then he had gone to Rome, shared a studio with another man, and spoiled marble for a period. But there was always some flaw in the blocks he became possessed of, or in the models (to his mind), after a trial or two. So he gave *that* up, and contented himself with cultivating and improving his art taste generally, and in watching the exertions of his friend.

He had lingered on the Continent long, for anything was preferable to that life at Waltham, and if "anything" would have been accorded toleration in comparison, how much more that existence abroad, which to live was a poem, to look back upon a source of never-failing delight!

But now that he had risked asterisks in the poem of his life, and come back to England to "do some-

thing," the lines rang out with bolder, brighter force and vigour and melody than ever, for Leonard Ponsonby was in love, and it was returned. He felt that it was with a warmth that taught him no meaner degree would have been bearable to him. He could not look into her eyes and doubt it: he could not hear the slightest inflection of her voice—always agitated with the soft wondrous melody of an Æolian harp when he was near—and doubt it. He had but to mark that marvellous lighting up of eye, cheek, and brow, and that gladly-given little hand in welcome, to feel assured of it. Truly, passionately, undoubtedly, it was returned.

They all met at the Leighton's house one evening. Mrs. Leighton's oaken room was the scene of festivity, for Mrs. Leighton had questioned her son about his now suspected love for Sybil, and her son had told her nothing; he had been polite, son-like, but *not* communicative. Mrs. Leighton, since he would not assist her in her strivings after useful knowledge, very naturally determined on sounding for herself those depths of his heart where Sybil might be. Therefore this party was organized for musical and other purposes.

General Rivers was there with his daughters, and Mrs. Rivers was there with a harassed face and an anxious heart; and Mrs. Ponsonby, her son, daughter, and many others were there; but with the "many others" I have nothing to do.

Two of Leonard's ardent desires were gratified; once more he saw *her*—the mother of his love—and once more she spoke to him in those tones

women only employ to those they esteem. His mother, his sister, and Sybil Rivers, too, were now made known to one another; and with rare gratification he saw that Sybil was talking to Alice as if she liked and was interested in her.

Mrs. Rivers saw that it was "too late" to give the word of warning to her daughter which she had at last decided upon giving, before this evening's events upset her determination. Things must take their course now, she feared, as far as Leonard was concerned, for Leonard's passion was visible enough; she only prayed fervently that by Sybil, for Sybil's sake, it might not be returned.

They met as strangers, the mothers of the two who had grown to love each other so well; with the coldness, but *not* with the indifference of strangers; and this latter fact Mrs. Leighton noticed and marvelled at, and inwardly put into a secure place for future investigation. On the brow of the one, as they bowed to each other, came a livid paleness, that had for its component parts dread, heart-sickening, and annoyance; and on the brow of the better woman burnt the better emotional shade of crimson. The Honourable Mrs. Leighton was sorely puzzled.

But Sybil and Leonard saw none of this; they had reached that rare stage of happiness when the emotions of others are unmarked.

Had it not been for that cloud, unseen by others, but lowering so heavily in her eyes over the Ponsonby family, Mrs. Rivers would have felt womanly and maternal pleasure at the prospect of a union between so richly gifted a man in every way as was

Leonard Ponsonby, with her daughter Sybil. As it was she nourished the hope that the pleasure Sybil was unquestionably evincing in his society was only the pleasure a clever girl like Sybil would naturally experience at being the sole object of attention to a clever man.

Mrs. Ponsonby was uncomfortable also. She, for once in her life, saw plainly what was looming in the future. She knew well that if Leonard chose to make Sybil an offer, and Sybil accepted Leonard as her future husband, that nothing *she* could say or do would interrupt the current of affairs. The marriage would open up a communication again with Mrs. Rivers, the old dreaded friend of her girlhood ; when this was done, *what* might not ensue ? Mrs. Ponsonby put the uncomfortable thought as far from her as possible, but it was difficult to do so with the divided husband and wife sitting in the same room with *her*—the cause of it—and her son and their daughter going along the path that would lead to—what ?—with such frightful rapidity.

John Leighton had played his part as host well for several hours ; he had talked in his usual earnest, gentlemanly way, and done all that was customary ; no one had to complain of a lack of attention from him, or anything like absence of mind on his part, but not the less had the strain been hard and the struggle a heavy one.

In the first place, he thought that Sybil need not have been quite so happy before him so soon, or at least, that she need not have behaved as if she supposed it a natural thing that all tenderer feeling than

mere friendship for her should have died out in his heart already. In the next place, it is not agreeable to be shown by the one in the world whom you prefer that another is preferred to you; and this becomes doubly unpleasant when that other is your friend. In the third place, he knew, did she gain an insight into the facts of the case, that his mother would never let her anger at his being refused cool by allowing the subject to drop. And this last thought was a perfect horror to him. He knew that though to the "world" Mrs. Leighton would be silent as death on the matter, that he would be liable to being harassed about it for years to come, whenever she was alone with him; for he knew that his mother's love for him and pride in him was such that Sybil would never be forgiven. Now he felt that to have been refused by, to have lost Sybil, was bad enough, but that to hear about it constantly would be worse; so he had a good motive for concealing his feelings if this had been his sole one. But it was not; he saw that if he did not root it out quickly, that soon he would be in love with another man's wife. As I before said, the strain was hard, the struggle a heavy one, and so, towards the end of the evening, he went away to recruit his strength and spirits to his own little study where he could be alone.

Vanish the early dream, the dream he had nourished since boyhood, vanish utterly, since it could *never* be realized! She, the star he had worshipped, would be the wife of his friend, to be met by him frequently (for none must guess his secret), to be thought of

"only" as the "wife of his friend." He felt terribly depressed, undervalued, *alone* at that moment. He had come out from among them, and who was there to miss him?—unless it might be lovely Alice Ponsonby. He thought of how, if Leonard had gone through it, Sybil's eyes would have lingered shyly about the door till he reappeared. He thought of how his mother, if she made no discoveries to worry him about, would surely go on worrying him about seeing that "young Ponsonby didn't carry Sybil off." And so he sat there leaning his elbow on the table, ~~his~~ head on his hand, and still feeling terribly *alone*.

A light step by his side, a light hand on his shoulder, a light, kind voice asking him to "forgive her for intruding upon him, but she was passing the door to go and get a book his mother had left in the dining-room, and now wanted to show mamma." He looked up; Helen was standing by him clothed in her pretty pink silk and all sorts of household virtues, and with a great deal of what looked like sweet gentle sympathy in her eyes; besides all this, *she* had sought him, had come to him when he was feeling "alone and undervalued."

The host and his hazel-eyed guest left that little study, pledged, plighted, betrothed. As they re-entered the room where the company was assembled, Mrs. Leighton saw that "something had happened;" and Helen mentally resolved upon shortly abolishing that "absurd shrine."

CHAPTER XII.

Showing the private warmth of feeling of the Ponsonby family towards the bride elect.

WHY had he done it? Why had he done this deed which laid upon him the obligation of confining ~~his~~ thoughts to *her* for the term of his natural life? He could not help asking himself that question as he sat and looked alternately at her little trivial air of elation, and Sybil's deep, passionate one of love—for Leonard.

He might enjoy a great deal of very fair happiness with her after all; but was it well that this should be so? Was it well that, having dreamt of better things, he should decline on a lower range of feeling—take comfort, feel solace in the affections of a narrower heart?

A short time before, and John Leighton would have deemed him a feeble prophet indeed who had told him that soon would come the time when—still loving a woman whose hand he had but recently sought—force of circumstances, and an intense dislike to hearing things “talked about,” would hurry him into a proposal to that woman's sister. Probably, did we but know, the majority of offers are made in this way, on the spur of the moment, and not after mature re-

flection; and it is well that it should be so; "impulse" rarely misleads the one who acts upon it.

Another little drama had been enacted this same evening: Leonard had said something to Sybil which had the great merit of being perfectly clear and to the point to *her*, and utterly unintelligible to any one else who might chance to overhear it. The answer to this question, too, seemed to be entirely satisfactory; for though Sybil said nothing with her lips, the tongue of her heart spoke eloquently through her eyes.

And yet another question had been asked and answered; as the last notes were being beaten faintly of that "kettledrum" of Mrs. Leighton's, Mrs. Ponsonby, for the first time, sought the side of her former friend. "You see how things are going," she whispered, almost piteously; "Sybil, can I trust you still?"

"You may do so," was Mrs. Rivers's answer, as, with a sadder shade of thought, she turned away to once more watch anxiously, look fondly on "how things were going."

"Haven't you had enough of London, mother?" Leonard Ponsonby asked, a few days later, as he entered his mother's drawing-room.

"Oh! quite, quite enough, I assure you; I wish with all my heart I had never come."

"So do I," chimed in Alice, pettishly; sundry things had been announced, and Alice had not taken pleasure in them.

"That is well," said Leonard, ignoring the pettishness of both mother and sister; he often found it best to attend solely to the letter of their speeches,

and let the spirit "gang its own gait." "That is well, because you will take the greater pleasure in doing what I am going to ask you. I want you to go back to Waltham at once, and ask the two Rivers's down to stay for a time. Sybil is anxious naturally to see the place, and Helen of course must be asked too. And while you are about it, mother, you had better invite Leighton."

"I don't see why," said Alice.

"Well I do," answered Leonard, cheerfully. "I know if Mrs. Leighton gets them down into Cornwall I shall go too; so, by the same rule, if we take Helen into Norfolk, Leighton must be invited."

"I don't think your father will like it, Leonard; I don't at all think he will like it; he disapproves—that is he is not pleased at the idea of the match."

"Why is he not pleased?"

Leonard asked the question sharply.

"I hardly know; how *should* I know? Your father is peculiar, and you should really, Leonard, consult his peculiarities."

"To the extent of giving up my bride—giving up a girl I love better than my soul, I suppose, mother. No, no; my duty to my father stops far, very far short of *that*, even had I chosen any one less faultless than Sybil Rivers. I will write to my father." He sat down, and drew a blotting-book towards him.

"No, no, Leonard! pray do not—pray do not!" The mother came forward clasping her hands imploringly, and (it struck both her children) affrightedly.

"I think it would be Leonard's best course, mamma," said Alice. Alice's sense of justice was

aroused by this interference, this attempted thwarting, this petty parental tyranny.

"You know nothing at all about it," replied Mrs. Ponsonby, angrily. "Leonard, do not, I beseech you, write to your father about it; leave all that to me. We shall be going home soon; they shall be invited—all of them, as you wish; and I will talk to your father, and see that their visit is not made unpleasant to them."

"By Jove! I should hope it will not be made so," said Leonard, haughtily.

How often, he thought, for how long a portion of his life was he to be made smart through his mother's silliness and his father's moroseness. The old feeling, that had slept for a term of years, came back as her feeble, purposeless objections fell upon his ears—the old, old feeling that there was an element wanting in his family, the possession of which made other families' happiness: and that element was "confidence." He had no desire to see the absurd tell-everything-to-everybody plan come into vogue; but he did reprobate that system which had always galled him in his boyhood being still pursued, that system of his mother's, of always tremblingly deferring to some mental bogie of his father, which grappled with would surely vanish into thin air.

"And when will they want to go to Waltham, Leonard?"

"My dear mother, you phrase it in such an extraordinary manner. Here I have been using all my influence with Sybil, to get her to say she would come to us."

"I thought you said she had a great desire to see the place."

"So she has ; but I assure you she isn't in the least accustomed to volunteer her company ; not a bit of it. Sybil will go to Waltham (where she *ought* to go of course), and enjoy going very much indeed ; but she must be asked properly or not at all. The latter end of July or August will be the best time, I think, for Waltham ; not but what the place always looks well."

"Do you think Mrs. Leighton likes that engagement of her son's?" asked Alice. Alice could not help it ; she really took quite a bright-eyed pleasure in Mrs. Leighton's grimly awarded approbation of the scheme of happiness her son had so rapidly chalked out for himself.

"I don't know," said Leonard. "Helen Rivers is a very nice girl. I don't see why she shouldn't like it. Sybil is very much pleased about it."

Leonard evidently considered this *the* great point.

"He is dreadfully tame-spirited," Alice remarked. "His wife will lead a horrible life, I should imagine, if his mother does not happen to like her."

"He's not 'tame-spirited ;' when it suits him to assert himself, you will find he is quite capable of doing it," replied her brother.

"That's all very well to *say*, Leonard ; but those sort of people always avoid the test, and get out of the difficulty that it never does 'suit them' to assert themselves." Alice did not wish to be convinced now of John Leighton's possessing any good or manly qualities.

"I had something else to ask you, mother," said Leonard, shaking off the little feeling of annoyance, "and that was to call on Mrs. Rivers; but——"

"Now, Leonard," interrupted Mrs. Ponsonby, peevishly, "I really can't do it; and I really don't see why I should do it; I'm tired, and I'm busy."

"If you had waited till I finished my sentence, mother, you would have found that excuses were needless. Mrs. Rivers has left town rather unexpectedly."

"Oh! what for?"

"I hardly know; she was not very well, I believe; town is too hot for her; she's used to sea-side air; so she has gone home."

"Curious family arrangements those of the Rivers's," said Alice. "Has Sybil ever told you, Leonard, the reason why the General and her mother bow and scrape to each other in society still, though they are separated? I believe the General to be right: as somebody must be wrong in the affair, probably Mrs. Rivers is. I think I shall ask Sybil."

"It is a painful subject to her; so I think you had better let it alone, Alice," replied her brother, thoughtfully. "Sybil knows just enough to make her sorry and sad—that is, she knows that long ago, when she was a little child, her father, after having taken his children out for a whole day's pleasure, and being perhaps kinder to them than he had ever been before, brought them home to a house where their mother was not, and to the knowledge that he could be very harsh. Don't talk to Sybil about it, there's a good girl."

Leonard knew all Sybil did about that concealed letter and its consequences; but he did not care to start Alice off on a special surmising expedition; and most unexpectedly were his wishes reinforced by his mother. With a flushed face, and nervous agitated air, she rose to quit the room. "I should hope," she said, as the door offered a momentary check to her progress, "that you will have the good feeling, Alice, to avoid any such topic. If I thought you capable of anything so indelicate, heartless, and vulgar, as betraying curiosity to Sybil about her mother, I should risk offending Leonard rather than, by inviting her, place her in a position of so much annoyance."

The brother and sister exchanged those wide-eyed glances which are indicative of astonishment; for Mrs. Ponsonby, who was not usually very famous for her delicacy, kindheartedness, or refinement, was evidently serious enough in this—that with her consent no allusion should be made to Sybil about her mother.

CHAPTER XIII.

Master and servant, and master and dog.

THE arrival of the post-bags at Waltham Priory was never a very exciting or important event; nevertheless the boy was despatched daily, with all becoming form and ceremony, to the Waltham village post-office, on the back of a big pony, and with an imposing leather strap over his shoulders: pendant from this strap was the bag intended to contain the letters which so rarely came. Their not coming was a small point in the eyes of enlightened rusticity; but had they not been "sent for," with the same state other gentlemen round observed with regard to *their* expected effusions, enlightened rusticity would have marvelled greatly thereat.

The bag had its fastening arrangements as seldom loosened now, though the wife and daughter were both away, as hitherto. The solitary man looked with as little impatience as he was accustomed to exhibit for the advent of that bag. The missives never came—nor were they expected.

Perhaps it was the knowledge of this latter fact, to which the former was due. A mere "duty letter,"

that *ought* to be written, but which will be carelessly read—and only read at all because it ought to be—is a hard thing to write ; and neither Mrs. Ponsonby nor her daughter were in the habit of doing hard things when they could possibly avoid them.

He had enjoyed a time of deep outward peace and uninterrupted laziness. He had lounged about in a dressing-gown all day, and taken his meals with a most Bohemian-like disregard of hours. He had been enabled to hide himself *away* from all visitors, in shady alcoves and deep impenetrable copses, with which his grounds abounded, and there had been no one to “hunt him out,” as Alice, heading a party of her friends, would too often do.

He has grown a grey-haired, grey-visaged man since we saw him last. All that remains of the Walter of old is the anxiously-watchful, fluctuating expression of his blue eyes. They are the same in expression still, but even they have altered in form, for the brow above them has lowered, and the lids enclose them deeply and squarely, and this alteration in the regions around appear to have altered their shape.

He has grown very stout, too ; a sort of pallid fatness disguises the once stalwart form of the man ; and he stoops his head, with that air so terrible to witness—the air of one who has been beaten in life, and who can neither recover—nor resent—the flagellation.

Old, slovenly, and—alas ! alas ! for the husband and father !—uncared for !

So he walks about amidst the glowing tints of a dying July—which dies so vigorously that no sadness

can be felt—and hugs his solitude to his heart, and hopes that it may last.

But as he walks along with his hands clasped behind his back, his head down, and his anxious eyes flickering glances all around, James comes out to him bringing the post-bag.

It is neither the day for the letter to come from the lawyer, the agent, or from Leonard ; from whom then can it be? James solves the question by unlocking the bag and taking from thence a pale slight envelope of a pearl-grey hue, covered with fine tracery. "It is from Miss Alice;" he opens, and from Miss Alice it proves to be.

It is a bitter thing for a father to feel that the handwriting of his child is strange to him ; it would have been a bitter thing to any child, could it have seen the indifference with which that letter was opened.

But not with indifference was it read ; for at once dawned upon him the horrible conviction that his precious solitude was to be interrupted.

"James," he commenced, peevishly, "your mistress is coming home."

"So I suppose, sir." James always ducked his head humbly when he spoke ; but he was a terrible servant to be afflicted with, for he watched one keenly the while.

"Yes, yes," replied his master, impatiently ; "but at once—on the 3rd, that is—and two ladies are coming with her, or directly after her. You had better go and talk to Mrs. Evans about it." (Mrs. Evans was the housekeeper.)

"Two ladies from London?" said James, with his air of humility very strongly upon him.

"Yes."

"Young ladies, sir?"

"Yes."

"Might I ask their names, sir?" He almost purred now, he spoke *so* humbly, *so* gently—and yet, why should he have asked for information that Melanie, Mrs. Ponsonby's Belgian maid, had given him in her letter of yesterday?

"Rivers; their name is Rivers." The inquisitiveness of his old servant was evidently annoying to Mr. Ponsonby. This was the letter which enabled Mr. Ponsonby to give the information his servant sought:

"DEAR PAPA,

"Mamma insists on *my* writing to tell you that we are about to return, as she is too tired to do so herself. She hopes that you will not be annoyed at it, but the Rivers's have accepted the invitation we were obliged to give them; they will either come down with us on the 3rd, or follow us a few days later. I hope we shall have fine picnic weather—otherwise they will be an awful bore to *me* during these long autumn days. Mamma sends her love.

"Believe me,

"Your affectionate daughter,

"ALICE PONSONBY."

It was very good of her to say that she was his "affectionate" daughter: he would never have found

it out otherwise from the tenor of that short little note.

He stood holding it languidly in his hand: there was that "giving-up of all things" in his inert attitude, that betokened the receipt—after many and repeated ones—of some blow hard *indeed* to bear; so hard, in fact, that it could not be "borne," but must rather be utterly succumbed to. And this—whatever it might be—was very apparent to his old "confidential" servant James.

Confidential servants—after the period has passed in which it becomes pleasant to "confide" in them—are acknowledged to be bores of the most colossal social magnitude. Now a casual observer, after gazing at James, would never have been prepared to declare that it could at any time have been "pleasant" to confide in a man who interrogated you *so* closely, yet so wordlessly. He had no need to *utter* his questions; what his small, keen, greenish-hued eyes did *not* screw out of you, his chin (which he was in the habit of stroking slowly all the time you were speaking to him) *did*. It was a hard, blue chin, with a habit of involuntarily elevating itself when it had discovered anything, in a sort of coldly cruel, egotistical, self-congratulatory manner, that was very hard for the one at whom that chin was rubbed to endure.

There are some people who, if they have on any occasion done you a favour, no matter how small—or behaved in such a way that you are deluded into believing that they have done you one—neither forget it themselves nor allow you to forget it. They force the favour upon your acceptance, perhaps; but

not the less do they trade upon it afterwards. Probably the most wearily obnoxious form this social tyranny takes, is when some person allows a confidence to be screwed out of them. The successful operator upon the poor little cork you essayed to keep tight, insists invariably upon making such a merit of not handing it about publicly, that the wretched victim hazily doubts at last whether it is not one, after all, on the part of his tormentor.

How frightfully deceptive appearances are! I am not alluding to those "appearances" which represent an income of five thousand a year, and which are compressed out of five hundred; but of those terrible "seemings" which have to do with the heart and feelings and nerves—not the pockets.

It is a sickening thing to sit at a man's table and know that your cordial, genial host, who beams heart-felt (polished) satisfaction upon every guest, is in reality a harsh, saturnine husband and father, and a severe, gruff master. As *she* expatiates so eloquently and elegantly upon the superior advantages of dinners à la *Russe* over every other, and appeals so tenderly for corroboration of her sentiments to her husband, it is an unpleasant thing to reflect upon what you have "heard on good authority," viz., that to him in private she is as cold and rugged as an unpolished block of marble.

To outsiders James Watson was an old, favourite, much indulged servant, who had (they allowed) his little peculiarities of temper and manner, but who was doubtless thoroughly trustworthy, estimable, faithful, honest, and attached. How he touched people

with that assurance he rarely failed to give them, of his having lived "nigh upon eight-and-twenty years with master, and of his never having left him for a single day during the whole of the time." It had quite a feudal sound, this assertion, and so many people thought; but some few who had listened to it, and amongst them Leonard, had felt that it must have been a pleasant thing, truly, to have been subjected for such a term to that interrogatory chin, and those slinkingly watchful eyes.

The largest, best built, most commodious and imposing house in Waltham—next to the Priory itself—was the Rectory. It had grounds around it inferior only in magnitude to its differently designated neighbour. The standard roses which bloomed on the Rectory lawn—though there were no ladies resident there—had a wider celebrity than any of the floral triumphs Mrs. Ponsonby, aided by an expensive gardener who wouldn't allow her to cut a flower, achieved. Never a daisy even, and far less a dandelion, broke the emerald of a lawn whose turfy elasticity was unequalled in the neighbourhood. Never a blank space in a bed betrayed a trifling inaccuracy in those "succession" arrangements, which were regulated by Mr. Nepean himself, and carried out by a youthful gardener who scarcely, when left to himself, knew an artichoke from a rose.

And if the exterior of the Rectory was fair, the interior could proudly put in its claim to be considered not one whit inferior. The few whom the Rector admitted to it, for instance, could find no manner of

fault with his library, with its richly carved oak writing-table and bookshelves; with its sound-deadening carpet; with its magnificent bronzes.

He had no paintings in this room; he would not have broken the rich, warm-pervading hue of the books for the sake of the finest painting in the world. Though the bronzes were fine—delightfully so—in themselves they were subservient to the books. They supported some things on which more books could be placed, or they held candles which threw the light on the titles of those he would be likely to want of an evening.

In one corner of the room was spread a large tiger-skin rug, and on this rug there might generally be found a huge hound, whose grand head, muscular proportions, and long yellow coat showed her breed. Brenda, though in her dreams her heart frequently flew back to the Highlands, and went “a chasing the deer,” would have told you, could she speak, that in spite of her early well-developed sporting tendencies, she had found the truest happiness in life consisted in reposing on that rug, and throwing glances indicative of affection on her master, who had brought her away from his brother’s home on the Scottish hills, to share with him the comforts and solitude of his English rectory.

Let any one who desires to win a noble heart entirely unto themselves get a fine young Slot hound, and be kind to it. There is something grand in inspiring such an affection as one of these dogs will feel for you. The contrast between the immense power of these hounds, who are strong enough to tear you

to pieces in a moment, and big enough to eat you, and their indescribable gentleness to, and reliance on you, is touchingly gratifying to our heart, and vanity, and feelings.

Sitting in an easy chair with his head thrown back against the cushion, in a position that brings his strikingly powerful, massive aristocratic, but not handsome features "well out" against the dark background of the books, is a man of about thirty-five or thirty-seven years. On the broad brow, on the firm mouth, on the whole contour of the face, middle age had set its seal in such characters that after looking at him *that* was the sole impress one could desire to see upon a countenance. But the ardour of youth gleamed through eyes of so brightly brilliant a blue, that the soul of a turquoise must have been absorbed into them. And the vigour of youth showed itself in a powerful ease and grace of movement that belongs alone to a matchless organization and the most patrician birth.

It is the 3rd of August; and as one of Mr. Nepean's hands hangs down and rests on Brenda's yellow head, the other holds a letter, just received, up for perusal.

"DEAR NEPEAN (it ran),

"If you have nothing much better to do, and you feel disposed to confer a great favour on a fellow, drive over to Althorpe to meet the six o'clock down train. The Rivers's are going down with my mother—that's not my reason though, for I could ride on the box as they could not have me inside. I want to speak to you, and to insure a pleasant 'first impres-

sion' for once in my life on arriving in that neighbourhood; therefore, I ask you to be there at six sharp, with your trap to drive me home.

"Believe me, faithfully yours,

"LEONARD PONSONBY."

"I'm glad he's coming home, eh! Brenda, old girl? Are you too, that you rise up and shake yourself? Of course we will go and meet him."

Mr. Nepean—the Rev. Roland Nepean—had been but one short year at Waltham, yet in that time he had contrived to revolutionize the opinions of his congregation as to the manners and customs it behoved a clergyman to conform to. He kept a huge hound, a double dog-cart, and a pair of high-stepping, fast-trotting bays, who had already made a name for themselves even in well-horsed Norfolk. He as studiously avoided penetrating at unwelcome times into the dwellings of the poor, as into those of the rich. He never lifted the covers of their boilers to see how much cabbage they had, or read them homilies on the vanity and wickedness of their lives, in words and tones that too many conscientious young curates would shrivel up at the thought of addressing to an equal, but pour out with faultily glib eloquence upon those who have no other language at command than those fatal words of acquiescence, "Well, sir, you're right, sir."

But in spite of his not doing these things, and many others (such as elaborately patting every towzled head as its juvenile owner passed him, or shaking hands conspicuously with the oldest and cleanest

paupers), Roland Nepean had won every heart in the village. It was well known that though he did not enact the part of detective in their cottages, that the sick, the sorrowful, the sad, the dying, had in him an earnest, watchful friend. After the crushingly condescending manners of a former rector, his seemed cold at first; but they soon found out that the real warmth had not lain under that absurd coating of mock humility which had induced the predecessor to grasp both hands of a peasant, while he would pass with the most telling superiority the tenant-farmer who might otherwise perchance have imagined himself *not* so very inferior to his rector.

Now with Roland Nepean there was no effort. Knowing himself to be a gentleman, he never strove to impress upon his flock that he was one, and that they must on no account forget it. Courteous, considerate, frank, asking, desiring no more for himself than he awarded to every human being, he was revered, beloved, respected—regarded as the great large-minded Christian gentleman, he was by every individual of every grade and class. And happily—though some of his attributes are peculiar to one whom I am endeavouring to portray—Roland Nepean is no singular instance in the great and glorious profession to which he belongs.

CHAPTER XIV.

Sybil goes down to Waltham, where Prince Rupert's ghost is raised for her benefit.

"It is a lovely place," said Sybil, enthusiastically. The carriage containing Mrs. and Miss Ponsonby and their two young guests was just rolling them up to that portion of the entrance drive where the best view of the house was gained. Waltham Priory owed that exclamation partly to its own charms, but far more largely to its being the "place" of Leonard's father.

"Yes," Mrs. Ponsonby assented, "it was a pretty place; but Sybil would scarcely believe how much Mr. Ponsonby had improved it. Improving places, she might say, was the one pleasure of Mr. Ponsonby's life. He didn't care in the least for society, and he hated strangers."

Sybil gave utterance to a tempered hope that he would not hate her. She was surprised herself at the humility with which she said it; but he was Leonard's father, that accounted for much.

"Society!" said Alice, scornfully; "there will not be much society down here yet for some time. The Ardleighs *never* come here till the end of August."

"Poor Waltham!" said Sybil, laughing; "to be dependent for all it knows of society on Lord Ardleigh."

"I didn't say Lord Ardleigh, Sybil; I didn't mean him alone, of course, but his family. His sister is such a nice girl, such a charming girl; you can't judge of her in London."

"I am glad you tell me that," interrupted Sybil; "it prepares me; for really, from what I saw of her in town, I should never have pronounced Blanche Ardleigh either nice or charming."

"But she *is*; and as to her sister-in-law, Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh, *she* is delightful. Nothing is *anything* about here unless she is at it. She always drives a mail phaeton—a pair of chestnuts with white near fore legs—through Althorpe on a market-day, and causes quite a sensation, I assure you. She is a daughter of Lord Banners Dutton, and *immensely* popular."

How change of air brings out certain diseases. In London, where Lord Ardleigh and Lord Banners Dutton were little people, Sybil had never detected the rich vein of snobbery which ran through Alice's nature. However, she did not *wish* to see aught that was not pleasant in Leonard's sister, so she reserved the remark that Mrs. Dervil lacked one element, she should think, of popularity, viz., modesty, for Helen's ears alone, and changed the subject by saying—

"I like that friend of Leonard's who met him at the station. I don't think I should care much, if I lived at Waltham, for Lord Ardleigh's society, with such a rector as Mr. Nepean so conveniently near."

And Alice blushed a little painfully, Sybil thought, as she answered—

“Oh, Mr. Nepean; I can’t say much about him, for the people who like Leonard never like me.”

“Don’t say that, Alice dear,” said Sybil, with perhaps more affection in her tones than she had ever shown to Alice before. A something about the latter as she said those words touched a sympathetic womanly chord in the breast of the happily betrothed girl.

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"I will make it as little horrible as possible," said Mr. Nepean. "I was quite a boy at the time, about eleven or twelve, and I was at a school a few miles in from the south coast. United to a naturally

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She had a short, abrupt, affectedly frank manner, and an assumption of masculine tastes and manners, and expressions that caused her to be denominated "a jolly little brick" by all the foolish young men, and a "rather extraordinary person in whom they *trusted* there was no harm" by equally foolish old ladies.

There *was* no harm in her; lighthearted, light-headed, as she was, she had many true, good, noble qualities, but they were put out of court, and kept in the background, through her having been misled while quite a girl with the idea that it would well

And Alice blushed a little painfully, Sybil thought, as she answered—

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disturbing himself from the occupation of the moment for the sake of any woman," actually left off springing Alice Ponsonby's parasol, and staring under the brim of Sybil's hat (surreptitiously this last, for he was a well-bred little lord), to go and—not "assist" Mrs. Dervil out of her miniature mail phaeton, she required no "assistance,"—but congratulate her on the masterly manner in which she had tooled them clear of all rucks.

A little woman, slightly and delicately made, Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh always gave one the idea of taking up a large portion of the world. Her dresses stood out more than other women's dresses—not harshly and sturdily as if the iron hoops beneath were the agents, but airily, in a volatile fashion, in an apparent excess of lightheartedness. Her light hair, of a pale yellow, was lifted up high from off her forehead, leaving totally exposed a fair, handsome, high-featured face, that would be too coarse and determined you could see plainly, in a few years, but which was pleasing enough as yet.

She had a short, abrupt, affectedly frank manner, and an assumption of masculine tastes and manners, and expressions that caused her to be denominated "a jolly little brick" by all the foolish young men, and a "rather extraordinary person in whom they *trusted* there was no harm" by equally foolish old ladies.

There *was* no harm in her; lighthearted, light-headed, as she was, she had many true, good, noble qualities, but they were put out of court, and kept in the background, through her having been misled while quite a girl with the idea that it would well

become her to enact the part of "Kate Coventry." She was encouraged in the belief, and strengthened in the mistake, of imagining that she would be a more perfect "whip" and equestrian if she interlarded her discourse plentifully with stable slang, and became very "fast," generally. And so it had come to pass that in her own neighbourhood—though, as Alice Ponsonby had truly said, "nothing was anything" without her—Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh, invariably invited to render things attractive to her special band of vassals, was looked shyly upon by ladies.

It was a sight to witness the way in which the chestnuts were checked, and the tightly-belted-in groom sprang with folded arms to their heads.

Before Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh shook hands with the ladies who gathered around the moment she stepped out, she drew a tiny blue enamel and diamond-backed watch from her pocket. "Ten miles in forty minutes," she said, looking up for the applause that was sure to follow; "come, that's not bad at all, considering I never touched them once."

"And not a hair turned," said Lord Ardleigh.

"They are the handsomest ponies I ever saw," said Alice; "but where is Mr. Ardleigh? he promised to come."

"Yes; but he was called off at the last moment—from coming with me that is: I told him the time I meant to do the distance in, and he got an idea that we should come to grief in this glen because of the little gulches; so he said he would follow in a tax-cart, with some rugs for my ponies. It was just as well for him to be useful, you know, so I agreed to the plan."

CHAPTER XVI.

In which Helen and Brenda both lose their tempers without sufficient cause.

A PORTION of the pleasure, and no small portion either, of the humbler class of outdoor rural festive entertainments consists in assisting—or rather retarding—the preparations for dinner. But persons of the Ponsonby calibre are differently organized. Under the careful guidance of experienced hands, belonging to powdered heads, the snowy damask adapts itself with the same conventional rapidity to the turf as it does to the dining-table. There is nothing for those who have been assembled together to get hot under the sun and tired of each other to do, but to wander about and essay to get up enthusiasm for the surrounding fits of “lovely scenery,” till such time as their liveried masters graciously permit them to “eat and be merry.”

That time “before meat” is a mistake. Women can be happy enough, provided their dresses answer *all* their anticipations, and are becoming “day wear.” They have a far greater talent for fitting any niche they may be required to occupy than men. The latter have, during the earlier stages of proceedings, various unpleasant convictions constantly

coming well home to them. One of these is, that there is a terrible want of purpose in the affair in which they have engaged. Another is, that though grass is pretty to look at, the ants which inhabit it will render it more than disagreeable to sit upon. A third is, that when they do get the wine for which they are thirsting it will be hot. And the last—and perhaps worst—is, that some ponderous dame, whom for various reasons they cannot offend, will fix their attention in a way they cannot ignore, and exact service from them for the remainder of the day. For it is a fact, that the selfishness of woman comes out strongly—nowhere indeed *so* strongly as at a picnic. Elderly ladies demand a great amount of shawl carrying and camp-stool fetching there: naturally enough their choice of one to get them these things falls upon the most active, in fact “the young” men.

Sybil and Leonard strolled off together—none of the foregoing reflections applied to *him*; and as to Sybil, it is a fact that, fastidious as she was wont to be about costume, on this occasion she showed an utter disregard for the safety and well-being of her delicate blue robe. For the sake of hearing Leonard expatiate to her *alone* on the charms of any special little pet bit of scenery, she tramped bravely on through undergrowth that hurt her feet and scratched the kid off her boots, and vandyked irregularly the hem of her garments. The light touch of her hand on his arm rendered her impervious to heat, oblivious of fatigue, unmindful of the sun, unconscious of the postponement of dinner. Wandering along the brakeside glen in all the glorious happiness of love’s young

dream, the handsome, noble-looking man, and the lovely *spirituelle* girl—the pair whom nature and fate alike ordained for each other—were far separated from the thought utterly by rich gulfs of love and youth, hope and joy,—from thinking that period of waiting for dinner “a mistake.”

The cloth was spread—the salad mixed—the wine reposing in impromptu coolers—the flies and gnats were settling with insulting hums upon the uncovered delicacies, and still the assembled guests looked in vain for Mrs. Ponsonby to give the signal for them to “fall to” upon the same.

And this arose from no lack of management on her part; Mrs. Ponsonby’s arrangements were excellent; but justice must not be done to that which she had provided until Miss Ardleigh chose to appear.

This was hard on those who were true to time. Particularly hard upon her brother, who didn’t care whether she came or not, and who was hungry, and thirsty, and hot. Very hard on John Leighton, who had seen Sybil and Leonard walk off so happily together, and who had attempted to get up a counterfeit of that happiness in the case of Helen and himself. But Helen was not one to aid him effectually; she was very fond of him, and proud of him, and properly devoted to him, but her love, pride, and devotion did not reach the point of making her—in his presence—unconscious of minute furze bushes which pricked her feet, and colossal brakes which tore her dress. She puckered her forehead up into a frown, with that expression which of all others is most trying to a man—dissatisfaction; and the sun made her sneeze, and

sneezing constantly is not a great beautifier of the face. And she withdrew her hand pettishly from his arm, and apologized even more pettishly for doing so. She "must hold up her dress," she said, "though she hated nothing so much; but since he would come and walk up these horrid paths, &c., &c." Poor fellow! he had made a mistake—he who had indulged in such bright dreams of love and a wife—a cruel mistake, a sad one. This woman whom he was going to marry, loved him with the best love she had to give, and at the same time grew pettish over a pricked foot, and a torn dress! He had far better have remained alone a little longer on *that* night.

Roland Nepean was inclined to think it hard for a few ill-regulated minutes; he had taken up a comfortable position where only one sunbeam could get at him, and even that was kept from being unpleasant by Alice Ponsonby's parasol. Alice was bending her head down, looking and speaking softly, and gently, to Brenda, who, fatigued with her long run, was lying down by her master cooling her yellow throat on the grass, and letting her tongue fall out in a mute appeal for water.

Mr. Nepean had never thought Alice so pretty, so charming before, and yet he had never been, like most people, blinded by her manner, to the extent of thinking her really frivolous. He had been keen enough to see through the upper crust, and was convinced there was fair fruit beneath. He did feel that waiting for dinner was a mistake, when in order to reply more conveniently to some remarks Lord Arleigh and his sister-in-law addressed to her, Alice

placed a few inches more turf between them, and allowed the sunbeams to fall unimpeded on his head.

"She's a little dazzled by the fellow's title," he thought, as in a few minutes, at the suggestion of Mrs. Dervil, the sunshade was transferred to her brother's hand, in order that he might hold it to shade all three. And still though he thought this, though in order to converse with the little fair gentleman, so richly gifted by fortune, so poorly gifted by nature, though in order to converse with greater freedom and unrestraint with Lord Ardleigh, Alice turned a portion of what might have been supposed to be a cool shoulder upon, still Mr. Nepean did not rush at the conclusion of her being worthless, fickle, and foolish. But for all his tolerance it was a very laughing reprimand Brenda got, when she answered a captious little kick from Lord Ardleigh soon after, by rushing at him with a deep growl, and upsetting him. She did not attempt to bite the fallen lord, she only kept him down with her strong yellow feet, and looked down into his face with severe eyes. Perhaps it might have been caused by something in Nepean's scarcely subdued smile, but certain it is, that after that little occurrence, Lord Ardleigh took a greater and more tender interest in the adjustment of Alice's parasol, especially in the presence of Mr. Nepean.

Mrs. Dervil was getting tired of entertaining and being entertained by the knot of cavaliers who had gathered around her.

"I wish Blanche would come," she said, im-

patiently, "since Mrs. Ponsonby *is* polite enough to wait; the fun of the picnic never commences till after dinner. And dinner itself would be much nicer without her."

"Well, I don't know about that, such a day as this," replied Lord Ardleigh, "my sister will fweeze all that's got too hot; won't she, Miss Ponsonby?"

"No; I shall not agree with you; I shall not allow you to say so; you are always accusing your sister of being cold. I think her charming."

"Good gracious!" was Mrs. Dervil's only verbal commentary; but assent in Alice's remarks was certainly not expressed in that shrug of the shoulders.

"Blanche isn't bad when she likes anybody," said Blanche's brother, Dervil, deprecatingly. That gentleman, I have omitted to mention, had recently arrived with the rugs and champagne. He had been eagerly, I may say, "warmly," greeted by his wife. "Oh, Dervil," she had exclaimed, running up to him as he descended from the tax-cart. "Oh, Dervil! have you brought 'pink?'"

She was alluding to the beverage, and her anxiety to know which he had brought was to be attributed—*not* to any especial partiality for it—but to her having a bet as to which he would bring; a heavy bet of many pairs of gloves with his brother, who severely reprehended "Dervil's taste in wine."

"Blanche isn't bad when she likes anybody; she can be civil enough and pleasant enough when she likes anybody; she has plenty of brains."

"Ah! you always got on better with Blanche than I did," said Lord Ardleigh. "I confess I don't care for

a woman with brains, always try to rule a fellow, and I hate that."

"Blanche can twist you round her finger ten times more easily than she can Dervil, after all though," said Mrs. Dervil; "*he* is fond of her, *you* are afraid of her."

"I am nothing of the kind."

"You *are*."

"I tell you I am not."

The little vexed question as to whether love or fear predominated, was rapidly developing itself into a family quarrel of a most *un*-patrician like order. The appearance of an open carriage in which a lady reclined, put a stop to it, not one whit too soon. The lady was Blanche—Miss Ardleigh—herself. It was well that she came just then, for unquestionably that "waiting for dinner" had been proved a mistake.

Miss Ardleigh was handsome, in a cold, calm, statue-like way, and she had formed her manners on the same model as her person. A stately hostess, never a cordial one, she had for the last two or three years made hospitality at Welton Hall a sad thing for those who had partaken of it; for during that period she had reigned absolutely over her brother's establishment. As she held in his inclinations on all points with a strong hand, it was perhaps scarcely to be wondered at that Alice Ponsonby should find her charming, and outwardly defer to her.

CHAPTER XVII.

Being a few pages devoted to Love and Valour, and a regret that their comrade "Wit" should be so conspicuously absent.

MRS. DERVIL's assertion that Lord Ardleigh was afraid of his sister Blanche, had even to the most casual observer an appearance of being founded upon fact. He was far from being such a complacent little lord, now that she had arrived upon the scene of action. He stroked his moustache less, he sounded his r's more; and he put down Alice's parasol with an air of haste and confusion, as if having suddenly awakened to the knowledge of its being an undesirable plaything.

Mrs. Dervil marked these signs and laughed; Alice marked them and blushed—hotly; and Mr. Nepean showed that he marked them too, by fixing his eyes on Alice's face. She felt that he was seeking there for a sympathetic sign of derision for the obedient lord—and she was not quite prepared to give it yet.

Now Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh, popularity-spoiled and aggressively-fast as she was, was far from being an unamiable, or bad-hearted woman. She would not have caused a fly mental anguish; she never

willingly hurt anybody's feelings. But Miss Ardleigh's cool tyrannical superiority to other people's wants and wishes was a little too much even for her laughing, careless, sister-in-law.

"Come round the corner,—the corner where that oak stands,—for one minute with me, and I will show you some of the loveliest little ferns you ever saw in your lives," she said, springing to her feet, and addressing Lord Ardleigh and Alice.

"Dinner is ready," protested Mrs. Ponsonby, who dared not openly abet the plan in the face of the haughty blonde, who had already opened her blue eyes wide with anger; "and here are Sybil and Leonard come back; do not go for your ferns till after dinner, Mrs. Ardleigh."

"We will be back before Miss Ardleigh has taken off her gloves, Mrs. Ponsonby; I assure you we will. You have no idea how long it takes Blanche to get her gloves off, has she, Ardleigh? Oh! I forgot though, you dare not say anything because Blanche is looking at you. Come along; come with me and get the ferns; we will be back directly."

Mrs. Dervil had made the suggestion in a fit of lighthearted malice against the watchful sister, whom she knew well would be as angry as her cold nature would allow, at this little mutual fern-seeking engagement of Alice and Lord Ardleigh's. She really contemplated no serious contingencies when she took her dancing steps off in the direction of the ferns.

Sybil watched them till they turned that corner, and then looking round to speak to Leonard, she found her watch had been shared by Mr. Nepean.

She was not one who, because she was engaged herself and marvellously happy, ignored every other sample of the passion that came within her ken. Sybil had exercised so much toleration for Alice at first, solely on Leonard's account, that she had now come to feel a deep interest in her on her own. This latter feeling had its birth in the discovery she had made on arriving at Waltham. One woman never thinks the worse of another—quite the reverse—if she finds that other has had the power to charm some man whom, without loving, she still likes and respects immensely. There must be something latent in a nature that won the sympathies of Roland Nepean, she argued, when the conflicting impression made upon her by Alice, when they first met, rose up to do battle with this latter and more favourable one.

So now when Alice quitted the side of this clerical Hyperion for a horticultural—or botanical rather—stroll with the Satyr in patent-leather boots, Sybil could not avoid giving a sort of interrogatory glance at Roland Nepean, when she looked up and found him by her side. The glance said, "Do you mean to stand *that*?" and the verbal reply showed that he had read it aright—though to one less quick than Sybil it might have seemed to savour of the round-about.

"Did you ever remark, Miss Sybil, that the horse who's ahead before they turn Tattenham Corner is *not* the horse who wins the blue riband?"

"I never see clearly who is ahead," she answered, laughing; "I dislike the confusion; my mind is not

at rest till the winning-post is gained by the horse *I* like best."

"Still you would not like a horse in which you condescended to interest yourself to walk over the course, would you?—you would prefer seeing him win after some good hard running?"

"Not when a Blink Bonny was against a Hampstead Heath pony," Sybil answered, warmly; "not when I know that he may be weighted, by a mistake, so heavily, that he may lose through it, and allow the blue riband to grace the neck of one who can't appreciate it; but what in this instance represents Tattenham Corner?"

"The evening of this day. How is it that I find myself answering a question of such importance (to me) so quietly when you ask it? I had not even put it to myself yet. But the mistake you alluded to—what is that?"

"You think that in a woman's eyes gold can gild the straightened forehead of a fool."

"You are severe on the favourite, because the noblest guest of our admirable hostess; but I assure you you are wrong. I do not think that it can in every woman's eyes at any rate. Not in yours, for instance; not, *I think*, in another's."

"Well, at all events," said Sybil, as she seated herself at the cloth and marked that the fern-gatherers had not returned yet; "well, at all events, I am glad that Tattenham Corner is so near."

Miss Ardleigh had been deposited by her attentive but somewhat nervous hostess as far as possible from the latter lady's side. Mrs. Ponsonby had seen the

wrath growing on Miss Ardleigh's face as minute after minute flew by, and still the brother whom she ruled so well with that massive white hand of hers returned not.

"Blanche is getting waxy," Dervil had cheerfully remarked to his nearest neighbour, who happened to be John Leighton; "she has been mortally afraid of Alice Ponsonby for the last year, for Ardleigh has given a pull at the reins once or twice; but he will think a long time before he takes the bit between his teeth in earnest."

Dervil seemed quite pleasantly excited; he evidently regarded the possibility of anything like a break in the family monotony with much kindly interest. Finding John Leighton an attentive if not an actively sympathetic listener, he proceeded yet further.

"You see, my sister—she's quite right, mind you, for her heart will never get hurt whatever she does—wants to barter Ardleigh away for an earl: you know what I mean?"

"Not exactly, I confess," said Leighton.

"Why she means to be a countess herself, so she is on the look out for a promising earl, *with a sister*; now you see, she will give the sister to Ardleigh, and she will take the brother herself. It's sharp practice; my wife found out what she was aiming at. I should never have done so; for I didn't suspect there was so much talent in the family. My wife is an excessively good-natured woman, you know, and nothing pleases her better than riling Blanche. She told Blanche she had

found her out at once. 'I read you like a book,' she said to her; and then she told what she thought. I know she was right—Mrs. Dervil, I mean—for Blanche was so awfully enraged with her. I like my sister myself uncommonly: that's through her never having interfered with me at all. I was a detrimental, and no good for barter."

"Here is Mrs. Dervil," interrupted Leighton; "I will give her my place:" and he rose as he said it, for the Ardleigh confidences were not very interesting to him.

To account for Mrs. Dervil's reappearance alone, I must go back to the moment when she had beguiled her companions from the path of duty to that which led to the ferns.

Rounding the old oak at the corner, was a footpath which led steeply down in a curve to a ditch that divided the brakeside glen from a pasture. The ferns were facts; there they were, very pretty ones too, growing in full view, but they laboured under the slight disadvantage of being on the opposite side of the ditch.

There were two things to which perhaps Lord Ardleigh had a more profound dislike than to aught else in life. Trouble was one, cattle the other. These feelings combined to render him motionless on the present occasion, in spite of his brother's wife volubly, and Miss Ponsonby gently, asking him "just to jump over and dig a few up;" for there were some remarkably handsome red bullocks feeding in the pasture from which that little ditch divided them.

"We will come here again after dinner and bring some of the other fellows; they will get your ferns better than I can. I should make a mistake—don't know a fern from a weed."

"Nonsense, Ardleigh! for shame; look, Miss Ponsonby has actually managed to get across the ditch herself; you must go now."

Lord Ardleigh pulled his moustache and hated Alice vehemently for a few moments, for by going over in that exceedingly unnecessary manner Alice had placed him in the wrong. But he saw his sister-in-law laughing at his hesitation. So he carefully adjusted his little feet to the stones Alice had crossed on, and presently stood by her side with one eye on a splashed boot, and the other on a calm cow, who to his distempered imagination appeared to have red eyes and a suspiciously active tail.

"What a time you are; never mind them," said Mrs. Dervil, after a minute or two. She was tired of standing alone; her wishes were apt to veer suddenly with respect to most things; the desire for the ferns had vanished.

"They break off just as I *nearly* get them up," said Alice. "I will come in a minute though."

"Well, I needn't wait for you," said Mrs. Dervil, "for I am sure you would be safe from a buffalo with Ardleigh near you."

So Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh walked off alone; regained the party, took her seat at the table-cloth, and commencing her dinner and a laughing flirtation with her husband, forgot all about the pair whom she had left on the wrong side of the ditch.

When people are hungry and the pangs of that hunger have to be assuaged while the limbs are still new to the enforced orientalism of their position, they are not apt for the first few uncomfortable minutes to trouble themselves about the evolutions of others. For a time no one appeared to miss Alice and Lord Ardleigh. Miss Ardleigh, to be sure, lifted a face fraught with a cold anger to her blooming sister-in-law, who was too much occupied with some pigeon-pie, and compliments on her driving from John Leighton, to regard it.

Mr. Leighton was telling her that he had never seen ponies step better under a lady's hand than hers did; and she was rewarding him for saying it by offering to drive him home to Waltham in the evening. Helen—one of those women who *always* look blank when anything is proposed to lover or husband by any other than themselves—had only time to hate Mrs. Dervil for one throb of her heart, before John Leighton's tact spared her.

"You will like to go behind those ponies of Mrs. Ardleigh's, won't you, Helen? you will prefer them to the Waltham carriage."

And Helen—assuaged—answered "yes," with such smiling triumphant condescension, that Mrs. Dervil, whose indifference to her absence or presence had been but a moment before supreme, could have hit her now with a hearty good will.

"Hallo! where's Alice?" asked Leonard, after a time.

"And where's Ardleigh?" asked Dervil.

"Dear me; where *can* they be?" said Mrs. Pon-

sonby, trying not to look happy and triumphant, as a throb of maternal pleasure swelled her heart on thus hearing their names coupled together. She had many wearing, tearing anxieties, poor woman; to see Alice firmly and well established as a wife, would be to see one of them removed.

"Why I forgot all about them," said Mrs. Dervil, candidly. "I left them in the ditch, and they said they were coming directly. Something must have happened to them; run and look for them, Dervil; perhaps a bullock has gored Ardleigh, or a toad croaked him into fits."

"I don't think it's worth my while to go and heat myself in the cause of people who are so lost to common sense, as to be conscious of a dinner awaiting them, and still prefer a damp ditch to it. No, no; I am not going."

"They can't have missed their way, can they?" asked Mrs. Ponsonby, vainly endeavouring not to look the exultation she felt.

"It would be impossible for the gentleman to return till the lady chose to do so; you may rest assured, Mrs. Ponsonby, that my brother would not have committed this breach of etiquette had not Miss Ponsonby's wishes chained him."

"That's pleasant," muttered Leonard, angrily; "that comes of having a flirt for a sister, and of dragging people to your festivities who look down upon you."

"Miss Ponsonby's wishes would never tend to chaining Lord Ardleigh, I am sure," said Sybil, fearlessly.

“Indeed,” replied Miss Ardleigh. Now there is something in this one word “indeed,” when the accent is laid on the syllable “in,” the aggravation of which is not to be described ; it must be felt to be understood, and two or three of that convivial party felt it with a vengeance.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"A dream that was o'er ere the waking
Had touched it with earthly hue."

To go back to the lord and the lady. The great broad-shouldered flies which particularly affect the vicinity of water on hot autumnal afternoons, had just been holding a monster-meeting on the cow's back. She stood it for a time, but a monster-meeting—proverbially a hard thing to tolerate—is uncommonly trying when it interferes with one's bodily comfort. Suddenly the cow put her head down with an angry low, and advanced to the water that was more than a ditch and less than a river, in a series of angry stamps that were discomposing to nerves of the calibre of Lord Ardleigh. "It couldn't have been fear;" he told Alice afterwards, "it couldn't have been fear. Of course not—the idea of such a thing was absurd—but it was one of those antipathies for which no fellow could be accountable." At any rate "something" rendered Lord Ardleigh incapable of either assisting Alice, or facing the cow. If he had had time he would have been sorry for Alice; but he could not stay to be sorry for any one but

himself. The cow advanced lowing, and stamping, and lashing itself into fiercer anger, each moment against the interlopers. Alice turned to defend herself by springing her parasol—the same which Lord Ardleigh had played with in happier moments—in its face. And when the cow paused in astonishment—or admiration at the progress Sangster had made since she had last had the pleasure of inspecting his works—Alice looked round to see her cavalier—running away.

It was not a lordly action. His light straw hat had fallen off, and his little feet came down like patent leather flashes of lightning on the footpath they trod so rapidly. His “antipathy” rendered him incapable of jumping over the ditch and out of danger; he was running—alas! for his future—along a footpath that led him to grass of a more impeding growth, and to more cows.

Alice forgot his title; forgot the consideration due to outraged feelings of any kind; forgot the cow which had outraged them; and so in her forgetfulness rang out such a merry peal of laughter as made Lord Ardleigh’s knees tremble under him in the purposeless way knees are apt to tremble in dreams. He was obliged to stop; something impelled him to look round; the cow which had caused his flight was lying down chewing the cud of humorous fancy, he could have sworn. And Alice Ponsonby was trying hardly and vainly to subdue her risibility. There was less actual danger, he found, in the spot he had trotted away from, than in the one to which he had been so incontinently hieing. He made stupendous efforts

to recover his lost composure as he walked back to meet Miss Ponsonby.

"What a bore," he thought; "if she tells Dervil's wife all the county will get hold of that beast of a cow, and I shall *always* be having her thrown at me. And if that parson fellow hears it——"

Lord Ardleigh could find no words in which to depict such a catastrophe as his last clause had faintly shadowed forth. He could hardly tell why, but he had during the course of that morning's events conceived almost as great an antipathy to the man whom all others liked, as he had to cattle. Tattenham Corner was far off in comparison to the nearness of the horse who wasn't a favourite to the blue riband.

"Blanche may do her worst," he thought, as he rejoined Alice; "she can only cut up rough and have Welton. I won't be made a laughing-stock through the county."

"I had an idea I was protecting your flight, Miss Ponsonby. I really thought you were just by my side. It was very foolish of you, don't you think, to stay here? That cow might have knocked you over; and what *is* a man to fight a cow with?"

"You did not give yourself much time to think," (he winced a little)—"that is, I mean," she continued, apologetically, "you were so frightened *for me* that you did not pause to see that there *was* no danger at all."

He did not look much like a baron of lineage high at that moment; but with a feminine genius for dates, Alice remembered that his barony had

been held by his ancestors since James the First's time.

"Don't let us go back to them at once. I'm not hungry; are you?"

When a gentleman 'professes himself indifferent to the pleasures of the table, it would ill become one of the gentler sex to be less ethereal in her tastes; especially when that gentleman is *the* eligible of the county in which that lady is chained by circumstances over which she has no control. Alice said she had no desire to go and dine, and further declared that a walk through the wood would "be delightful;" and as she said it, she thought of how far more innocently and usefully she had been employed an hour or two before in patting Brenda's honest, handsome head, and feeling that the eyes of Brenda's master were upon that head the while.

"Blanche may do her worst," he repeated to himself, as he strolled along by Alice's side through one of the most choked-up passes of the brakeside glen. "I can't and I won't be made a joke of."

He had always admired Alice; he had long wished that something might occur to hurry him into running counter to his sister's known wishes; and though this "something" that had occurred was not by any means what he could wish, still it would do to act upon. He had a good as well as a fair reason for throwing himself away, (for curiously enough, poor specimen as he was of humanity, that was the way the thought phrased itself in his mind). She (Alice) was lovely enough to do any man credit. What beauty she had! and what grace! and how

well that parson fellow seemed to know it! The end was that he offered his title and his estates, and a house in town,—all to be incumbered with himself—to Miss Ponsonby.

And she! Well, she thought for one moment of eyes frank and honest, manly and kind, that had long looked with a most friendly glance into her own. She thought of how to-day, as she had looked up from patting Brenda's head, those eyes had surely gleamed with a *more* than friendly light. She thought of what her feelings would be should she throw away a substance for a shadow—passing bright as that shadow was in comparison. She thought of how she would be admired and envied, and sought after, if she were Lady Ardleigh. And after thinking these things, and choking back other and better thoughts, she accepted the brave young noble who had fled at the lash of an angry cow's tail.

And then they rejoined the group who had just been discussing their prolonged absence.

"You won't peach about that cow, will you, Alice? There is something absurd about your having flourished the parasol in its face in that way under a mistake. I shouldn't like to hear them laugh at you; and Carry would be sure to,—she does at everybody."

Lord Ardleigh whispered this speech rather earnestly just before they came within earshot of the party, a portion of whom were looking at them with a degree of merriment scarcely subdued, that made the caution highly necessary. Alice gave him one look, a look that showed him that caution had been

ill-judged if he cared about the respect of his future wife. Perhaps if they had been further off, if there had been time for her not only to think, but to speak, not even the coronet dancing before her eyes would have induced her to hold a moment longer to the promise she had so lately given. She read him clearly: she saw all his weakness and cowardly meanness by the light of the little paltry candle he had held up to guide her along the course he wished her to go. And with this page of his character burning before her eyes in fearfully legible type, she took the place they made for her—the seat immediately opposite to Roland Nepean.

“Did you secure any ferns? You have been long enough to have made a rich and rare collection,” asked Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh, as the happy pair separated with that shamefacedness that marks the proceedings of happy pairs in almost every grade of life.

“No; we failed in getting up the roots,” Alice answered. The woman is sure to collect her wits first on these occasions; perhaps this is because she goes through life naturally anticipating offers, whereas the man feels that he has done something at last that all through life he has been endeavouring to avoid. “We came round by the path to avoid crossing the ditch,” Miss Ponsonby continued. Not a word about the cattle. Lord Ardleigh—despite the severity with which Blanche was eating her chicken—felt that he was reaping the reward of his sacrifice already. Not a word about the cattle!

“Ardleigh looks as if he had seen a ghost; he’s so pale,” remarked his brother Dervil.

"No, no," struck in Mrs. Dervil; "the brakeside glen has no unpleasant reputation; there are no ghosts here; but it used to be a great haunt of the witches. I think perhaps that Ardleigh may have been bewitched during his absence. Have you, Ardleigh? Confess."

"I think," interposed Miss Ardleigh, who had been internally seething all the time, "that you must have been talking a great deal lately to your groom, or you would not introduce such a tone into the conversation before *me*."

"I say, Blanche, none of that, if you please," remonstrated Dervil.

"And what is there objectionable in the tone of my remarks, pray?" retorted Mrs. Dervil, flashing up in quick defiance of her husband's sister. "You can't always rule, Blanche; take my advice, and don't try—don't risk a failure; a failure is so ignominious, you know."

Lord Ardleigh felt that though his sister-in-law had been struck by them, the shafts she was defending herself from had been aimed at him. He quite loved her at that moment; her saucy, fearless frankness inspired him with what in another man might eventually have developed into courage.

"You are right, Carry," he said, approvingly; "and now you must all join me in a bumper to the health and happiness of the future Lady Ardleigh—the health of the beautiful witch who has made this day in the brakeside glen the proudest of my life."

"Well done; not bad for you, Ardleigh," said Mrs. Dervil. "You might, to be sure, have said

something a trifle more novel on such an occasion ; but the leap was neatly taken, considering how you were pushed at it."

There were only two who failed to do all outward honour to the toast. Blanche would not, Mr. Nepean could not. Alice's eyes had sought his face when this announcement had been made—sought it with a deprecatingly piteous glance that stung him sharply. For the first time he realized fully his regard for this girl whom others called a frivolous flirt ; but of whom, with love's own keen divination, he knew better things ; for the first time he realized fully how very dear she had been to him. "A word from me and she would not have pledged herself to that jackanapes," he thought, "to this puny mind ; but I cannot blame her, for *I have not spoken it.*" And yet though he had just declared that he could not blame her, he *did* blame her very severely for not having waited in a marginal manner, and went through with great poignancy a great many of those sensations so eloquently described in the case of Maud's lover, when he saw the "Captain, the Lord, the padded thing," go down to the hall, from which he was excluded.

He could not honour the toast. Whatever Roland Nepean did was the outward reflection of an inward feeling ; and inwardly, though he was wishing her health and happiness, he had no strong wishes as to her attaining the latter through becoming Lady Ardleigh. So the hand that should have raised the glass in answer to Lord Ardleigh's call, was placed instead on Brenda's head ; and Brenda looking up,

gave her master all she had to give him—a glance of most loving sympathy. Alice Ponsonby, witnessing the way in which that toast was *not* honoured, felt a throb of deeper happiness than when the titled lover at her side had asked for and won her hand in the pass of the brakeside glen.

Perhaps the way in which he had made his announcement was the nearest approach to dignity that Lord Ardleigh ever attained in life. It is not given to all men to be other than profoundly ridiculous on all occasions. Lord Ardleigh had, however, said his say on this matter simply and unaffectedly enough; he had been goaded into something like manliness for once by his sister-in-law; but still, though he had behaved better than could have been expected of him, in frankly putting a stop to sidelong thrusts at Alice, there were those present who did not vouchsafe their entire approval of his conduct.

“Awkward the fellow is,” Leonard muttered to Sybil and Roland Nepean; “why on earth does he publish the offer of his hand to my sister with a flourish of trumpets, as if it was an act of royal condescension? There’s my mother, too, showing all the pride in life at the affair. I heartily hope Alice will be happy, of course I do, but I don’t believe she will. How can any woman be happy with a man who wears tight boots, and lisps whenever he does not forget to?”

“His boots only concern himself, they won’t pinch his wife, Leonard,” Sybil answered, rather coldly. She was angry with Nepean for having allowed things to come to what she felt would be a most

unhappy pass, consequently before Nepean she had no intention of depreciating his rival. "And as to his lisp," she continued, "if a man says words that are honest, straightforward, and true, it is little matter whether the r's and s's in those words ring out well or not. I *do* hope she will be happy herself, and make him so too. And do not let that great dog of yours push against me and upset my plate in that way, Mr. Nepean."

Sybil, with feminine reason and justice, was angry with Mr. Nepean for being—unsuccessful? No! but dilatory. A woman can forgive a man who errs from over-haste, but she will fan the flame of her wrath against the one who errs from over-prudence.

So Sybil drew her dress pettishly away from Brenda's great paw, and hit Brenda's head with her little white hand.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Is it well to wish thee happy? having known me to decline
On a lower range of feeling, and a narrower heart than mine."

It has come to be considered almost a rule at a picnic in the eastern counties that the various members of it shall not return home in the same vehicles they came in. This is partly supposed to have arisen from the fact of well-bred horses disliking being tethered like common beasts, and so frequently breaking their bonds and going off home unfettered at all points, and partly to redeem the affair, even at the eleventh hour, from all that is prosaic, by administering a totally uncalled-for tinge of discomfort to it.

It had been arranged that every one should return with the Waltham party to the Priory, to finish up the day with fruit, flirtation, and a light supper in the large music hall. This plan had become a doubly-delightful and desirable one now that Lord Ardleigh had taken the plunge. According to Mrs. Ponsonby the consent *she* had given could not be too soon ratified and approved by Alice's father.

"Such a comfort for us to have her settled in the county, you know, Mr. Nepean," Mrs. Ponsonby observed to her rector, when she, after many

efforts, caught him for a private chat; "and so *delightfully* settled too. Not that his title or wealth influence me in the least; but Lord Ardleigh is a young man about whom I have never heard anything but good, and that is such a thing for a mother to feel, Mr. Nepean, such a great thing for a mother."

Mr. Nepean, feeling he was called upon to say something consolatory, and condolatory, and complimentary, remarked that "it was a great thing, of course," and added that he "had never heard anything good or bad about Lord Ardleigh,"—he finished the sentence silently,—“but much that was remarkably indifferent.”

"And now we shall have her at Welton Hall," Mrs. Ponsonby went on, buoyantly, "so near us for the best part of the year. I was very much afraid she would have been carried off in London. I may tell you a little secret *now* that Alice cannot be compromised by it. She has known Lord Ardleigh a long time, you know; and, in fact, it's an old attachment."

"On Miss Ponsonby's part?" he asked, coldly.

"Yes." Mrs. Ponsonby had no evil intention in telling the story, but she thought it would sound well to say that Alice's heart had been prepared to go with her hand. She did not stop to analyze her motives, but she said her "yes" out as vigorously as if she were well assured she was stating a fact. And then she left him to go and repeat it to some one else.

"Good heavens! and her own mother has misunderstood her so!" he said to himself, half aloud and

half bitterly, as he was left alone. "I have seen a good many things slip by me in life, through a habit I have of pausing before I leap, but never one that I have regretted like this girl, whom I am told has long liked another man." And then, devoid of vanity as he was, he could but reflect how improbable this last statement was; for "she has known me," he thought as he advanced to meet Leonard, who came forward with a request that he (Nepean) would "drive Alice home."

It was rather an untoward request; but Leonard was ignorant of the real state of affairs; and this is how it had come about.

Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh, according to her promise, was going to drive John Leighton and Helen Rivers home in her phaeton. Helen had quite come round to liking the arrangement. It placed John Leighton behind her in a position which would enable him to talk to her nicely by leaning forward, without her having to disturb herself at all. More than this, Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh, she fondly anticipated, would be too much occupied with the reins and whip, and what appeared to Helen the thousand intricacies of driving, to take up any of his attention. Helen was one who would have liked to have kept John Leighton's conversational powers in a tightly corked-up bottle, and to have had the option of their being uncorked entirely at her own disposal. This being the case, she was rather hurt and disgusted to find that Mrs. Dervil appeared to have a freer use of her tongue, now the reins were in her hands, than she had enjoyed before. Mrs. Dervil talked fast,

and in a piquantly sprightly tone, when she elected to do so, and eschewed slang; and this gave her an immense advantage over Helen, who had a well-regulated method of speaking, which made her a long time saying a thing, and robbed that thing of all interest when it was said. Besides, on the present occasion she was cultivating a small crop of jealousies that had sprung up against John Leighton and Mrs. Dervil, and this rendered her speech more halting and her manner less pleasing than ever.

The Waltham pony-carriage had been sent for the conveyance home of Leonard and Sybil. Cut off thus from their companionship, Alice's sole aim had been to avoid being requested by Lord Ardleigh to trust herself to his Jehuship. Before she could take her place, however, in her mother's britzka, she found that Mrs. Ponsonby, acting, *she said*, under the conviction that her daughter was going home with Mrs. Dervil, had promised seats to three or four stray young ladies, who had come to the gathering any how, and were going home the best way they could.

Alice had strong prejudices against being crushed in a carriage; it spoiled not alone the easy flow of her drapery, on the graceful disposition of which she specially prided herself, but her temper. She wanted this night to avoid claptrap small talk, congratulations, tearful, friendly, and fatiguing; she was weary, over-excited; her head ached, and her heart was "sair for somebody," from much joy probably.

So she, Miss Ponsonby, the bride-elect of the

greatest landowner in the county, had to look round for a locomotive power to convey her home.

"Allow me to drive you home, Alice," Lord Ardleigh said, softly. From the moment he had proposed to her, Alice had assumed a newer, deeper, tenderer interest in his eyes. She was going to be his own now: the thought made him very proud of, and tender towards her. She was very lovely, very much admired; and in future, when this loveliness of hers called forth loud-mouthed admiration, the remark would be appended thereunto, that she was *his*. So he made his request softly and gently, yet showed in his manner of making it that his heart was engaged in its being acceded to.

Now, to have driven home with him then, when her heart was sick to death of him and of all things, would have been to take such a mental nausea to him as no after efforts of hers, dictated by prudence, could be safely counted upon overcoming. So she wisely resolved to befriend his cause in spite of himself. When he repeated his request, and added, that he "would drive her more carefully than he had ever driven before (which wasn't saying much), and that he would keep well up to the back of Mrs. Ponsonby's carriage—though the bays didn't like keeping behind anything—in order that she might be well assured of her daughter's safety"—when he repeated all this, Alice still mildly and firmly declined.

Here I must be forgiven for remarking what a boon these phrases are! "Mildly and firmly." No one says things mildly and firmly in real life that I

have ever met with: the combination has never come within my experience; but in fictitious life, the assertion that a person has been thus passively disagreeable carries great weight, and expresses a great deal. When one person "contempts" another, again, what a colossal amount of it is supposed to be implied by those words, "his lip curled with ineffable scorn!" We take that man with the curly lip to our hearts as the hero at once, and believe in him, and think him remarkably "well conceived," and so forth; forgetting that the "curling with ineffable scorn of the lip" is a sight that gladdens our eyes as seldom as the mild and firm accents are sounds that enchant our ears.

Lord Ardleigh had been very truly and lovingly in earnest in the formation of these little charioteering plans of his. So much affectionate solicitude deserved to be rewarded, Alice felt, though it was quite uncalled-for and undesired. She also felt that the reward would not come from her this night at least.

"I am afraid of a tandem," she said, softening the manner of her refusal as much as the matter of it would allow. "I am a coward, and afraid of a tandem; you must let me go home prosily and quietly this evening, and I will promise to try and conquer my foolish fears before long."

But still Lord Ardleigh urged his request, with that want of tact from which nothing, not his titles, nor estates, nor wealth, nor position, could prevent his conspicuously lapsing. And still Alice pleaded, protested, *but refused* as winningly as she could.

"I am afraid, am I not, Leonard?" she said, catching eagerly at the chance of escape offered her by her brother's passing. "Am I not afraid of going behind a tandem? You know I am, Len."

Leonard looked at his sister! "Poor Alice!" he thought, as something in the shade over the large blue eyes told him that perhaps this hasty betrothal was not altogether such a thing of joy.

"She will soon have more nerve," he said, politely, to Lord Ardleigh, who was already beginning to scowl over the probability of his plans being defeated; "but to-night those bays of yours would be too much for her; if you start at once and get clear of this narrow part the other traps can come up, and Alice shall not be long after you."

"Will you take her—will you take Miss Ponsonby? Will you go home with your brother, Alice?" asked Lord Ardleigh, anxiously. He was enduring mental prickly-heat at that moment as the bare idea crossed his mind of Alice's going home behind those matchless steppers, who enjoyed a county-wide reputation, not only for their own beauty, but for the skill with which they were driven.

"Yes," replied her brother, holding out his arm to her. "Come along, Alice."

Now Leonard was very far indeed from intending to diverge from ~~the~~ path of truth and probity; but in replying to Lord Ardleigh's question of "would *he* take his sister?" "yes," he sent that young nobleman off in a calm frame of mind under false pretences.

Leonard entirely forgot that the pony-carriage he

was going to drive back to Waltham Priory would only contain two, and that the second seat had been already appropriated in the minds of both Sybil and himself for the sole use of the former.

When he did remember it he saw a way out of the difficulty at once, to question the propriety of which never for a moment struck him. ●

"Oh, I tell you what you must do, Alice; I tell you how it must be: Nepean must drive you home. Nepean, you must take my sister. You will not be afraid of his horses."

So in absolute unconsciousness of the pair being more to each other than the "friend of my brother," and the "sister of my friend," Leonard made the best arrangement, as it appeared to him, for the safety and comfort of his sister Alice on her homeward journey in the wake of the tranquillized lord who had gone off with the happy conviction impressed upon his mind that his fair betrothed, if she was not with himself, was at least with no hated rival whom it was impossible to despise.

"Oh, Leonard," Sybil exclaimed, when he took his seat by her side, and gathered up the reins, and told her "how he had settled things"—"Oh, you stupid boy, you shouldn't have done *that*."

With a woman's quick appreciation of the various bearings of a case in the same moment that case is placed before her, Sybil saw room in the arrangement for much heart-burning and confusion.

● CHAPTER XX.

“ God pity them both ! and pity us all
Who vainly the dreams of youth recall ;
For of all sad words with tongue or pen,
The saddest are these—‘ It might have been,’ ”

I HAVE said that Sybil, with a woman's quick, ready appreciation of a case concerning another woman, had censured Leonard for his homeward-bound arrangements. But though she censured him, she did not intend enlightening him as to the “ why ” she did it, by sharing with him the secret she had half-surprised out of Roland Nepean that morning.

So when Leonard asked her why she found his plan faulty, she said, “ Oh, because it was ; how would he like her to have refused going home with him, and to have insisted on some one else—James, for instance—driving her ? ” Sybil had not the smallest intention of making matters worse by talking about them. Her anger had gone out against Roland Nepean ; she was only profoundly sorry for him now—for him and for that other one. And as she thought of Alice, anxiety mingled with her sorrow, for she knew the nature of the vessel too well to deem that it would carry the waters of affliction safely through life.

"Talking about James, Len, reminds me of something. I don't think your father will retain the oleaginous services of that domestic much longer, or Mrs. Ponsonby the elegant ones of Melanie."

"What makes you think they are going to strike?"

"Because Melanie told me this morning, in a burst of confidence that I am not conscious of having merited, that it would 'be fine to keep the Black Bull with such a man as Mr. James.' I did not care for further information, therefore I did not prolong the conversation; but I gathered from that sketchily suggestive remark, that James has in some wonderful manner won the heart that I had imagined totally given up to well-fitting boddices and shoes."

"Well," said Leonard, "I can only say, if that crossgrained old fellow has gained the heart—or rather the promise of the hand—of that piquant little Melanie, that it's an extraordinary thing. Why, Melanie has all a Frenchwoman's natural vivacity and refinement; you don't mean to tell me that you think she is going to marry that fellow, James?"

"If she does, Leonard, it will only be another of the mistakes that are so constantly being made. We, least of all people, could or should feel no surprise."

"Sententious Sybil! You don't wish to make me suppose that you suppose we are some of the 'mistakes' so eloquently alluded to, do you?"

"Oh no, Len, far—very far—from that!" said Sybil, eagerly, yet proudly, as she turned to meet the fond

laughing gaze of her interrogator: "but look at my sister and John Leighton: can any one see them together without seeing the mistake they have both made?—he in asking a woman he didn't love to marry him, and she in accepting him when she must have known such to be the case. Now see how restless she is of his noticing or speaking to any one else, and how that wretched uneasiness works upon her manner, which used to be pretty and graceful enough; it is altered now; it has a narrowness and littleness about it that will—that must—alienate a man with such a noble heart as John's."

Sybil flashed forth her words of praise with a warmth and energy Leonard had rarely heard even from her.

"How earnest you are in his behalf, Sybil," he said, quietly; "it tells me something that I never even suspected before, and accounts satisfactorily for a certain tinge of romantic fervour which has come over John lately, and which struck me as being singularly foreign to his grave practical character. You have been loved by him, and he has lost you; no woman who had not been would feel so strongly the disagreeables of his present position. Well, it's very generous of you, my darling. I must confess that had I been rejected by you, I could not have deluded myself even for the few impetuous moments that are required to say 'Will you marry me?' or words to that effect, into the belief that Helen could console me."

"Dear Len, of course not; you are very different to John Leighton, remember."

When a woman has once invested her heart, and affections, and interest, and pride, and ambition, in a man, she cannot endure him to be compared with any one—not even with one who in former days has shown himself equally alive to her charms. The interest hanging over the latter becomes very hazy and indistinct. At that moment Sybil was almost offended with Leonard for speaking of himself as *possibly* in John Leighton's position. She liked the latter, but she thought him immensely inferior to Leonard.

But if I linger so long with the pair in the pony carriage, I shall never get the whole party safely back to Waltham Priory.

When Alice, assisted by Mr. Nepean, took her seat in the double dog-cart behind the high-stepping bays, she felt for one moment a throb of wild joy for that she *was* there. The next a pang of something like remorseful despair shot through her heart as she reflected how soon this companionship would be over, and thought what might have been, had she not tied, bound, sold herself to another.

Mr. Nepean gathered up his reins, took his seat, gave the signal to his leather-belted groom to let go, and as that admirably regulated machine sprang to his place on the back of the cart, they went off at a slinging trot that soon carried them clear of the brakeside glen, which at that moment they both fondly trusted they might never see again.

The moonbeams falling down bright and clear, made all surrounding objects stand out distinct and clear in their silvery light; and Alice for the first

time looking hastily up, caught a view of the marbly-cold white face of her companion.

The path of duty may be the way to glory ; nevertheless, it is sometimes very hard to follow when we feel that, however strictly we keep to it, "glory" will never be attained by us, nor pleasure either, nor even homely comfort.

Roland Nepean was engaged in a contest between what he felt would be pleasantest for the time—the short time during which that drive was to last—and what would be best in the future. Undoubtedly, to eschew *the* subject altogether, and talk of the unimportant incidents of the day, of the full moon, of the wonderful speed of his horses, and of sundry other equally unimportant things, undoubtedly this would be the pleasantest path to pursue. But on the other hand, if he allowed a barrier of restraint to spring up between them now when each for the first time suspected his and her own and the other's secret, the feeling that it would be well to root up, would deepen dangerously. So he determined, just as Roland Nepean always *would* determine, on not doing that which was temporarily pleasantest, but on that which would be permanently right.

Both must be wounded—he knew that now ; he would do it at once.

" I have a great dislike to offering public congratulations—attribute my silence to that fact, if you please, Miss Ponsonby, and accept them now—that is if you can forgive the bad taste which induced *me* to refrain when all others were overpowering you."

. He spoke so calmly and quietly ; not even Alice,

well as she had grown to know every inflection of that voice, could detect the slightest change or falter in its intonation. The bays knew better though; they had a flick across their shoulders that told them at once something was wrong.

Alice muttered something which, in default of clearer evidence, he chose to consider a condonation of his offence of omission.

"Thank you for the pardon. Now, having offered my congratulations and made my peace, allow me to remark that Lord Ardleigh deserves the thanks of *all* who know you for not taking you out of the county. Mrs. Ponsonby has been expressing her delight to me at this part of the business. I only regret I cannot quite share her sentiments, as my own stay at Waltham is uncertain. But I shall look for a welcome in the future to Welton Hall; say, will you give it to me, Miss Ponsonby?"

His voice, unintentionally, had that fatal accent of "pleading" in it, which is surer to tell upon a woman's heart than any other. Alice could not answer his question; she could only say with a sob in her tone, "*Are* you going away really, really?"

She ought not to have said the words—at least not in the way she did—and she knew it, and he knew it too; and though he was gratified in one way, that even with a coronet dancing before her eyes she could still be true to her heart, he resolved, for her own sake, upon giving her a slight—a very slight—rebuff.

"Yes I am. Most probably I shall leave before you marry; if I do, you must exert your influence with Lord Ardleigh to take these horses off my

hands. I should like them to go to a good master, for you see I have invested all my love and pride in them, as other men do in their wives and sisters."

He thought the allusion to her marriage would be rebuke enough from him, for her having forgotten it for a moment. As to the horses, he would sooner have cut their throats than have seen them dragging the chariot wheels of Lord Ardleigh.

The drive home was not exactly a propitious one, for just as Alice was lacerating her heart with vain repinings, and by repeating to it those "saddest" of all sad words, "It might have been," they came upon Lord Ardleigh, who had upset himself, and broken his leader's knees, and cut his wheeler's shoulder, and otherwise done great harm to his horses' bodies and his own temper. It did not improve the latter to find Alice in the position she was in; and it aggrieved him sorely to have to accept a seat home in Nepean's dog-cart.

But rage rendering him speechless, he behaved perhaps better, *i.e.* more discreetly, than a wiser man might have done under the same trying circumstances.

CHAPTER XXI.

"———For one heard the quick wheeze
Of his chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering knees,
And sunken tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
As down on his haunches he shuddered and sank."

MR. PONSONBY had given his consent to his daughter becoming Lady Ardleigh, but not even the self-satisfied suitor could think that it was given eagerly or gladly.

"You will remember," he said, with a certain sorrowful dignity that not even his duffle dressing-gown and general air of care-for-nothing untidiness could destroy, "you will remember that *I* have never sought to forward this marriage, Lord Ardleigh; you will remember *that*, whatever happens. Should my name—I say this to you in confidence—should my name ever be spoken in such a way, for instance, as to be a reproach to Alice, *you* will bear in mind that I said these words to you now, and offered you to consider it no wrong if you rescinded the offer you have just made my daughter."

Lord Ardleigh was very much bewildered. "What do you mean?" he asked, pettishly; "who's going to mention your name at all—unpleasantly at least? I shall not care whether people abuse you or not; I

often hear you spoken of now as rather queer—touched in fact; but that will have nothing to do with Alice when she is *my* wife. And as to going back from my spoken word, I would have you to know that I am a gentleman and a man of honour, and more than all that, I have no *wish* to go back from it.”

“Very well, then,” replied Mr. Ponsonby; “I have said all I have to say; make the child happy, if you can. Her mother will say all that is to be said about the gratification we feel, and the honour you have done us; she likes saying those things and I don’t. You’ll excuse the omission from a man who has not felt pride or gratification in anything for years.”

And then Mr. Ponsonby took up his cap and his stick, and went out into the grounds of Waltham Priory.

This conversation took place on the morning after the picnic. Lord Ardleigh had been detained there by stress of fate partly, and partly by inclination. He had taken the opportunity, while the ladies were up dressing for a large riding-party which had been organized, to have the little interview recorded above with his future father-in-law.

The horses were ready outside the hall-door, and the ladies had come down equipped, and they now stood on the steps, discussing eagerly with each other and their cavaliers the respective merits of their steeds.

One horse above all others claimed general attention—a tall, splendidly powerful, yet lightly-built black. From the tip of his finely-pointed ear to the

broad sloping flank, every inch of this horse was perfect symmetry. His massive clean legs, his haughty crest, above all, the poise of his noble head and the lurking devil of hot high blood in his eye, showed he had come of a race pure, ancient, and perfect. He had only come home from the trainer's on the previous evening, and the message left with him was that "Prince Rupert would carry a lady better than any horse in England—if she could only sit him."

The last clause savoured of doubt as to Prince Rupert's amiability; but it detracted not one whit from the universal admiration he excited.

He was Alice's horse; and now, in her first burst of enthusiasm about him, she insisted that her father should be found to "come and see her start on him—he was such a beauty!" Perhaps one reason that she felt so warmly towards Prince Rupert at this moment was, that he was a fine neutral ground for Roland Nepean and herself to meet upon. They could both go up and pat the horse, and could talk to each other about him, because Mr. Nepean had recommended him—don't you remember?

Roland Nepean was going with them. In a small village, a riding-party embraces every equestrian; besides, where people are friendly, the pleasure that emanates from one house is public property, and therefore to be partaken by all around; more than this, if the clergyman of a parish—be he curate on nothing a year, or rector on thousands—is sure to be at the front of everything, if he has had the tact to discriminate between "piety and *mag*-piety." So Roland Nepean was going with them, partly because

he desired to do so, and partly because he had no excuse that Leonard would have considered fair for absenting himself.

Mr. Ponsonby had been found by ever-useful James; and when he presented himself and asked his daughter "what she wanted," that obsequious domestic motioned that the groom should lead the black still nearer for his master's inspection.

"Isn't he lovely, papa?" Alice asked, when the silence Mr. Ponsonby's advent created had lasted to her mind long enough. "Isn't he a great glossy darling?" and as she spoke she extended her white-gauntleted hand to caress the arching neck. As she did so, Prince Rupert laid one ear back and looked back at her with one eye, and scraped the ground with an impatient paw, and snorted.

"The horse looks like a devil," Mr. Ponsonby said, nervously; "don't ride him, Alice."

"I don't think it's temper; he's only full of play," said Lord Ardleigh, who fancied that Mr. Nepean looked sympathetic when Alice's father suggested she should not ride him.

"He looks uncommonly like the horse that bolted over a cliff 'in play' once upon a time when I was a boy," said Mr. Nepean, laying as he spoke a strong hand on the bridle, and compelling Prince Rupert to quiescence; "and curiously enough, as I told you before, his name was 'Prince Rupert.' Do you feel quite certain of yourself, Miss Ponsonby? Do you feel that you can keep your head even should Prince Rupert lose his? If you do, you are safe enough."

"It's all nonsense," interrupted Lord Ardleigh, pet-

tishly; "you're spoiling the horse's temper by pulling his mouth about. Miss Ponsonby will mount if you'll be good enough to stand out of the way."

Roland Nepean looked at Alice, and read irresolution in her eyes; there was danger, he knew, in that horse for her, for Alice was losing her nerve. "Take care, Lord Ardleigh," he said, quietly, "your feet are in the way," and as he spoke he led Prince Rupert up close to Alice and said kindly—

"The decision rests with yourself, after all: will you do as your father wishes?"

"I don't like his look, nor his name either," said Mrs. Ponsonby, half tearfully. "Make Boyle take the brute back again, Leonard; Alice, *don't* ride him."

"Len, may I?" said Sybil, eagerly. "Change horses with me, Alice," she continued, pointing to a pretty, lady-like brown mare, who was taking notes of the proceedings with a pair of liquid eyes.

"Yes, let Sybil; she rides *so* well," said Mrs. Ponsonby, who would not have scrupled to accept a baby as a substitute for her own daughter on this occasion.

For one moment a little of the animation of old came back to the nature that had been torpid so long. Mr. Ponsonby looked round the group with a quick, flashing, interrogatory glance, and then walking up to Sybil, he put his hand on her arm, saying:

"Not on that horse, my dear: how should we (he looked at his wife as he said it) account to your mother if you got hurt, or even frightened?"

"But I shall be neither, dear Mr. Ponsonby,"

Sybil answered, flushing with pride and pleasure at his betraying so much interest in her. You have no idea what horses I have tamed! My own 'Queen Mab' would strike a stranger as being terribly frisky till they saw me on her back. You must let us arrange it this way, please. Come, Len, will you put me up?"

So Leonard put her up; and the rest mounting, the whole party sallied forth in the clear September air; and as they wound out of the avenue, the last sight the eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Ponsonby and James fell upon, was the daughter of Sybil Rivers on the black horse Prince Rupert.

As Mr. Ponsonby turned away, with a sort of half sigh, his old servant addressed him.

"It might have been the very horse, sir—it might have been the very horse!"

They were a brilliant group! As they rode along, through a road partially overhung by fine oaks and elms, you might have searched broad England, as G. P. R. James always called it, without finding the combination on which we pride ourselves—our women, trees, and horses—better represented.

Sybil and Alice divided the honours of general remark and attention. When I say this, I do not mean to imply that their progress was through a crowd. General remark and attention bestowed upon you during a ride in the rural districts, means that one shooting-party, two turnip-pickers, one stone-breaker, and a cow-herd, paused in their pursuance of these various occupations, and gazed at you stolidly till an intervening corner hid you from their vision.

But Sybil and Alice divided the honours, such as they were. Sybil, on account of her remarkable beauty, and from the circumstance of her riding a horse already well known in the neighbourhood, from the trouble he had given Boyle in breaking him at all. And Alice, on account of her being "our young lady" in that district, and of her going to be—these things fly so—married to the young lord at Welton, who was popular just then, simply because he was not his father, who had been hated.

Helen was mounted on a grey duplicate of the ladylike brown; but Helen—gentle as her mare was—contrived to give it the appearance of an uneasy goer through her own uncontrollable fretfulness. She was now on the track of trying to worry John Leighton into exhibitions of devotion to her, which John Leighton was not prepared to offer. Added to this, Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh was there, superbly mounted, and looking a most charming Amazon in a black velvet hat with a small white feather in it; and John Leighton was unprincipled enough not only to say she looked well, but to evidently mean it too.

Sybil, Leonard, and Mr. Nepean rode abreast, and led the party at a hand-gallop for about half a mile, and Prince Rupert carried himself so steadily that his praises were rung in many keys.

"He has a splendid mouth," Sybil asserted, "and how he springs into his stride, Len; I am only afraid that Alice will like him too well from seeing how he behaves this morning, for I should like you to get him for me. I wish he would be just a little

bit vicious—just enough to show her that he isn't the perfection he has seemed all this morning."

"I think they have exaggerated his evil deeds," said Leonard, leaning forward as he spoke, and adjusting a portion of the glossy mane which had got turned over during the preliminary canter; "he does suit you well, Sybil. I shall get Alice to let you have him."

"How he has heated himself—for nothing—and cut his tongue," remarked Roland Nepean, rather gravely; "take my word for it, but he's a bad-tempered horse; you have given him no excuse for having his mouth in that state, Miss Rivers; he has pulled against nothing."

"That is the fault of his bit," said Leonard, carelessly. "I think nothing of his mouth bleeding; he has just the shoulders to give a lady a good seat. 'Pon my word, Sybil," he continued, admiringly, "Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh must look to her laurels to-day. He would have been quite thrown away in Alice's hands," he continued, with a brother's ready depreciation of his sister's works.

Prince Rupert appeared to be fully conscious of the admiration he was calling forth. He arched his neck, and picked his feet up higher every moment.

"He's absolutely prancing," said Sybil, her eyes gleaming with excitement; "he is a 'showy goer,' as they call it in the *Times*' advertisements, isn't he, Len? I tell you what I feel he looks like now—just like that historic horse of Vandyck's, who is walking out of the wood with King Charles upon his back—

only Vandyck's horse is white instead of brilliantly black, like Prince Rupert."

She brought her hand down on the near side of his neck as she said it; brought it down with a firm caressing pat that meant marked praise and approval. A wild toss of the head from the horse—a cry of surprise from Leonard—a hastily-checked exclamation of horror from Nepean—and Prince Rupert was away—away with his slender powerful legs stretched to their utmost—away like the wind.

The rest came up in confusion to learn the "how" and why, and they paused for a moment—the horses all with keenly pricked ears, and the riders with almost reeling brains—to mark that flight.

The black horse was going along like the very demon of speed; his long tail floated behind him in an upward curve like the banner of an evil spirit, and the flinty sparkles his flying hoofs struck up from the road were hailing around him.

Sybil was settled squarely in her saddle—they could see that in the one moment's vision it has taken me so long to describe. She was seated squarely—and so far well—but perilously back in her saddle; evidently the burst he had given had thrown his rider off her perpendicular in a manner she had not recovered. Would she recover it at all? *that* was the question.

Leonard had not again opened his lips since that first cry had escaped him. His face had gone of a death-like pallor, and his eyes spoke eloquently the words he could not utter, as he seized Nepean's arm, and pointed with his whip along the road.

"Not that way," Nepean answered, with the quick speech and understanding Leonard alone could have tolerated at that moment. "Not that way; but across these fields to the right and out by Carson's Mill—he's safe to take the road that is the straightest, and that road will bring him out by Carson's Mill."

"If he keeps to the road at all," said John Leighton, as Leonard and Nepean simultaneously struck their spurs up to the rowels in their horses' sides, and went over the hedge and away like birds on the "forlorn hope."

"If he keeps to the road at all, but it's my belief that he will fly all he comes to." He shuddered as he said it, and turned paler still. As he finished speaking, Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh did what no one had ever seen her do before, burst into tears; she rallied almost immediately, and attempted a hollow little laugh as she said—

"I have seen many a horse run away before, but I never felt like this about it."

"You are very kindhearted, and you like Sybil Rivers," said John Leighton, placing his hand on the pommel of the usually light-hearted Amazon.

"Like her! I do, indeed."

They were riding along at a sharp trot even then, but as Mrs. Dervil spoke, John slackened his rein, and the obedient horse broke into a gallop as his rider straightened himself in the saddle.

"Come along then," he said, "let us ride after her till we find her safe, or our own horses drop." So they set out, and Helen was left to wail her sister's

danger and her lover's defalcation, with Lord Arleigh and Alice.

It is pleasant to be run away with—I mean by a horse—so long as the road is a fair one, and the horse sufficiently master of the situation to avoid all that is unpleasant in the way of carts, and houses, and walls. Even in the streets of London there is no small amount of pleasure to be derived from an observation of the delicate tact displayed by the horse, who while carrying you along at full speed, steers clear of the little boys who always shout that “a horse and lady ’ve runn’d away,” and of such minor obstructions as omnibuses and cabs. But the pleasurable excitement must be over when the horse grows mad, and the pace is such that the rider’s breath is gone.

Well for Sybil’s friends, that they could not see as she flew past; the landscape had long ceased to reel before her—it simply “was not” any longer—there was space and a whirr about her, and a dreadful tightening at her heart. She had borne on the reins so heavily in vain attempt to check the horse, who had got them firmly in the vice of his strong teeth, that she had gradually leaned back, till now she was at such an angle that a lessening of the speed must be destruction; it was simply there being *no time* for her to fall off that kept her on.

On and on with an unbroken stride over level ground and hill and vale; the horse flung foam around him like an ocean wave, as he sped on at the great pace which made him appear like a black thunderbolt loose on the earth to the few wondering

peasants, who looking up from the soil of the fields they were working in, rubbed bewildered brows, and vaguely observed that "somethin' seemed wrong yon way."

Wrong; yes, terribly wrong. The powerful brute was mad, and the powerless rider was helplessly passive. The rush through the air had told on the frame which contained a heart that would never have quailed. With her eyes glaring, protruding fearfully, with her face set and rigid, and of a dead whiteness, with her beautiful hair blown straight back off her brow, senseless, past all knowledge, Sybil Rivers was borne along.

They had reined up at Carson's Mill, and in one moment they saw that she had not passed that way; the turf was unbroken, the road untorn.

"He has kept along *without swerving*," Leonard muttered hoarsely, as he turned and lashed his horse to greater speed back across an angle that would lead him to the straight line *she* must have followed. And Nepean, though he said nothing, almost groaned as he followed out the thought conveyed in Leonard's last words. The horse that would go at that pace *without swerving*, would soon—even had he not already—come to a rugged ground, where high portions of wall and wall-tower still standing, and deep ditch and moat now dry, marked the remains of a Roman encampment.

They were both famous "cross country riders;" never a man in the county took a better place in the most reckless field than Leonard; but to-day he rode as he had never ridden before, and, as his horse

fondly trusted, he would never ride again. They kept the pace side by side, rising at the same moment to the same leap, never slackening nor drawing bridle, but on and on in the same grand swoop. For they felt they were riding for life—not their own, but one they would have risked their own to save.

They reached the top of a dip that was just sufficient of a hill to give them a view of the surrounding lands clearly. And looking forward they saw—and tightened their lips as they saw it, and dug a sharper spur deeper still, and pressed to the utmost “forward” their already flying horses; they saw—and choked back a groan and spoke not—the black horse, a mere dark speck away in the distance, drop in mid-career. And the place where he fell, they both knew, was where deep ditch, rugged gully, and jagged broken wall, would make a fall fatal.

They had reached her now; they had lifted her from the ground; the wildest part of the horrible excitement was over, but not the worst of the tearing anxiety. They had found her across the still warm, heaving mass that had been the gallant horse; found her uncrushed, unhurt as far as cut or wound went, but cold, rigid, white as death.

They had come up together, Leonard and Nepean, Leighton and Mrs. Dervil; and not the authorized lover felt, in the midst of his anguish, a warmer throb of grateful admiration than did John Leighton when Mrs. Dervil reined up, sprang to her feet, and assured herself “that she was *alive*,” in what ap-

peared, even to those wildly impatient men, like a flash of light.

The horse—the wild young colt, Prince Rupert—had literally run till he dropped, but whether he would have dropped so soon had he not struck his chest against the fragment of a wall cannot be known. Down by that wall, which bore traces of that blow in blood and hair, he fell prone and dead, in his first and last battle for freedom.

They carried Sybil back to the house she had left so gaily, in a carriage borrowed from the house nearest to the spot where her horse had fallen. She had never moved once; and as she had swooned with her eyes wide open—with those sweet blue eyes Leonard had never before seen look other than soft and lovely, now horribly glaring—the sight was woefully painful. But Mrs. Dervil kept those who could listen to her from utter despair: *she* had felt the pulse throb, she declared; and she, sobbingly kissing the white brow, said that it had not the coldness of death.

Let those who will blame Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh for mounting the box of the borrowed barouche, and driving home in hat and habit. She quietly displaced the orthodox coachman, whose hand she saw was trembling, and on looking round for a substitute, she saw that the one she had counted on as steady-handed, was trembling too. So she mounted the box herself; and though her womanly heart was sorely aching for the accident that might prove fatal, not a drop of water would have been spilled from a brimming goblet had one been in the carriage which contained poor Sybil.

As poor heart-stricken Leonard and the saddened sorrowful group neared the steps of Waltham Priory, one came to meet them with even a deeper sorrow on his face.

"I feared it, I feared it, my poor boy!" Mr. Ponsonby said, leaning his head down in terrible self-abasement on the shoulder of his son. "To the mother and daughter our fatal horses and our fatal love are doomed to be a curse and a destruction." But Leonard was too sunk in sorrow to hear or heed these words.

CHAPTER XXII.

In which Esculapius makes some good running.

"I THINK I may venture to affirm that the present unfavourable symptoms will decrease considerably, if not disappear utterly, under careful treatment—such treatment as Miss Rivers will receive, I need not say, at my hands—in the course of the next twenty-four hours."

So spoke Mr., or as he was always called Dr. Collins, when he came down from the room where Sybil lay, and was met at the foot of the stairs by a bevy of anxious questioners. He said his sentence in that precisely systematic way which is so hard to bear when one is in a hurry to hear good or evil tidings. He was one of those men who are sure to become great and popular in a country neighbourhood, where people have not much to do, save fancy themselves indisposed and send for the doctor, for his manner was suave to oiliness. The pressure of that large, white, smooth, soft, fleshy hand was—many nervous ladies had been heard to declare—more reassuring than valerian. The tone of the little voice that came from the rather bulky frame had all the effect of a sweet surprise, it was so

caressingly little and squeaky. He had that air of purr about him that sick fanciful women are sure to like in their medical attendants. Above all, he was never in a hurry; and herein lay his greatest charm. People like to feel, when they are ill or ailing, that they are *the* object in life to the man who gives them authorized draughts of spoilt water and bread crumbs; they like him to show his delicate appreciation of their peculiar merits, by making his visits, for which they are going to pay him five guineas, as long as possible, and by his abstaining from all appearance of considering other patients worth visiting while he is paying it. Now, Doctor Collins had started in this practice sufficiently well off to enable him to seek popularity in the easy take-things-coolly style, a poorer man would not have dared to venture upon. He knew that if Mrs. Jones, the grocer's wife, elected to take offence at his staying two hours and a half with Lady Mildmay, the baronet's widow, when Lady Mildmay had nothing but *ennui* to battle against and Mrs. Jones's daughter had a fever,—he knew, I say, that he could afford *to wait*, and that his waiting patiently would result in Mrs. Jones being very glad to send for him again ere long.

If I may take a colour to illustrate his manners, I should call them of a rich tawny yellow. His subservience to women was a colossal thing in its way, but it was a kind of medical subservience to their being physically weaker, not the grand old chivalrous deference that pleases most. Such as it was, however, it pleased some women greatly by

its velvety softness; it made them think how nice he would be when they had a headache.

"Why doesn't he speak quicker, and not stay to be fascinating now?" exclaimed Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh, impatiently, as Mr. Collins brought his speech to a conclusion. She was not one of his votaries; she was too healthy to need him, and too honest to like him.

Telegrams had been despatched, summoning both General and Mrs. Rivers; *that* had been done with a promptitude and energy that struck all who had time to be struck with anything with surprise, by Mr. Ponsonby, inert Mr. Ponsonby himself. He had framed the messages; he, for the first time for years, had mounted a horse, and ridden over to the telegraph-office, and seen it safely into the hands of the clerk. And now there was nothing left to do till her father and mother would come, but to wait, and watch, and hope.

Upstairs in the room where lay that on which the hearts and thoughts of all in the house were centred, were Helen, Alice, Leonard, and one of those wonderful old women, who really do exist in far-off country villages, who are known familiarly as "Nurse Somebody," and who are always ready to come and "do" for any sufferer.

Character comes out greatly in a sick room. Were I a marrying man, I would never ask for the hand of a woman until I had seen her performing the part of a ministering angel in a case of pain and anguish. If she walked upon tiptoe, or rustled, or creaked, or dropped things she ought to have held fast, or

showed irresolution in putting down a bottle on the mantelpiece, or gave one of those ear-piercing "hushes" that are intended to express intense sympathy with the invalid's desire for quiet, and which have the slightly opposite effect of throwing the invalid into a fever of rage and hate—if she did any of these things—I would pronounce her a failure.

Helen was very sincerely attached to her sister, and very sincerely miserable about that accident which had placed her there so helplessly. But she showed this attachment and misery so unpleasantly. She was of the retrospective order of womankind; she was fond of telling people that if they had not done such a thing, something contrary to that which *had* happened would have happened. So now without desiring to drive knives into Leonard's heart, she kept on telling him in the intervals of her sobs, that if he had not let her mount that horse, dear Sybil would have been—ow—ugha ow'a.

Mr. Collins had given her hand one of those warmly-sympathetic delicately-pitying pressures he was wont to bestow upon his lady patients, and she had straightway gone off into the mistake of supposing that he was recognizing in that pressure her peculiar claims to be heartbroken and anxious. Consequently she quoted him constantly, till what "Mr. Collins says" became words of horror to those around Sybil.

The accessories of a tragic picture are frequently unfortunately very comic. There was something decidedly grotesque—if they had only been in spirits

to mark it—in seeing Mrs. Ponsonby pause on the threshold of the door of the room, nothing would have induced her to enter, in a white cambric dressing robe, frilled and pink-ribaned. She knew that for all the use she would be she might have arrayed herself in velvets and laces, bangles and bracelets: but with the same kind of feeling that sickness deserved a special *toilette* to be achieved in its honour as actuated the old nurse in putting on a species of head-gear for the service, bearing a suspiciously strong resemblance to a night-cap—with the same feeling, without the same reason for it—Mrs. Ponsonby put on her white cambric, and fluttered about like a mature sylph picked out in pink. She had a weakminded woman's horror of pain and suffering; it made her wretched, hysterical, more useless than ever. She “could do no good in the room,” she would say, therefore she wouldn't come in; but as she also had a weakminded woman's unsatisfying curiosity, she kept on coming to the door and peering round the corner at the swooning girl, and then shying off again in hasty rustles.

But Alice, though she had made no special *toilette* for it, was invaluable in that room. Hers was the voice that strove to soothe Sybil when she would awake occasionally from that strange, long faint, only to fall into it again deeper still. Hers was the hand that bathed Sybil's brow unceasingly, never touching it either harshly or falteringly. Hers was the foot that sped so lightly and swiftly for whatever was wanted; and above all, hers was the heart and voice that upheld Leonard with the strongly expressed fervent hope that “Sybil would soon recover.”

Out in the little anteroom of Sybil's chamber, there sat one with his face buried in his clasped hands, who listened as eagerly as Sybil's own father might, for any whisper of a change for the better. Perhaps when Leonard could notice it at all, the sympathy that touched him most was his father's; it had been so unlooked for.

Down below in the library which—with the dislike of glare which unhappy, anxious people always have—they had darkened to the properly disconsolate hue, were Lord Ardleigh, John Leighton, Mr. Nepean, and Mrs. Dervil.

The thing that troubled one of them most was, that he might perchance omit something of the eager anxiety he ought properly to evince, respecting the welfare of a lady who belonged in a measure to a house with which he was going to unite himself. Mr. Nepean had nothing to conceal—his sorrow for Sybil and sympathy for Leonard were brotherly; but poor John Leighton, with a grief akin to Leonard's own gnawing at his heart, had to "'ware his lightest word and look lest they should betray him."

And cautious as for Helen's—for *all* their sakes—he was, his caution under the keen eye of a thoroughly goodhearted, frank woman, was of no avail. She saw through the thin veil of conventional caring; she knew that a deeper interest lived in his heart than that which lived in his voice, when he would ask for latest tidings of Sybil. And Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh thought she did no wrong in giving him all the sympathy and information in her power.

Lord Ardleigh had patiently and nobly gone with-

out his luncheon; in fact his proper hour for partaking of mid-day refreshment was past when he returned with the rest from that unlucky ride. But when seven o'clock came he felt very hungry, and saw no reason for going without his dinner even if other people were unpractical enough not to care for it. So he threw out the suggestion of "wasn't it dinner-time?" in a deprecatingly mild way.

"Poor Ardleigh! you're hungry I dare say," said Mrs. Dervil, in a sort of contemptuously pitying tone, "and you have been in the background all day most amiably. As there is no one else to do it," she continued, turning to Roland Nepean, "I shall ring and order dinner on my own responsibility."

Now James was butler as well as being Mr. Ponsonby's "own man," and when he appeared at the door in answer to the bell, there was unmistakeably a glamour over his eyes that was not grief, a faltering in his speech that was not sorrow, and an uncertainty in his gait that was not fatigue.

"Let us have dinner, if you please," said Mrs. Dervil, politely, without looking up, "here or in the dining-room—whichever is least trouble."

No answer—that was not required—no movement, and that was rather extraordinary.

"Did you hear what Mrs. Ardleigh said?"

Mr. Nepean got up as he asked the question and walked towards the door, and James retrograded as he advanced, which was part what he desired, to get him out of the lady's sight.

"Did you hear what Mrs. Ardleigh said?"

James's answer was sufficiently wide of all purpose

to show that he could scarcely be held accountable even for a dinner order. So Nepean sought another domestic—they were all at large about the house—and repeated the order which James had not comprehended, but which on being taken from him caused him such deep anger that it partially sobered him.

He went to Melanie and confided to her his intention of not “standing it any longer.” His manner surprised Melanie into a condonation of an offence she—as one of a particularly abstemious nation—looked upon with horror. It was in vain though that she entreated him, with many pretty little shoulder-shruggings and hand-claspings, to tell her what he would not stand. James’s intention remained a dark mystery to the chosen of his heart, who however found comfort from many things in the assurance he gave her that he thought he saw his way to the Black Bull at last.

While Lord Ardleigh was enjoying the dinner, which in the seeking had brought about this little domestic disturbance, James made his way to the ante-room and gained speech for the first time since the morning with his master. All he said it is not necessary to transcribe here; the substance of his rather discursive remarks may easily be condensed in the assertion that he had “put up” with sundry things long enough, and that now he wanted to retire into the atmosphere of peace offered by the prospected dissolution of partnership between the Black Bull at Althorpe and his present landlord. He added that as he desired to become possessed of the “stock,” considered a very good one, of wines and spirits in the cellars of that famous and flourishing inn, he would

feel thankful if his master would present him with the sum of £800 and permit him to go at once.

Mr. Ponsonby contented himself for all reply, with getting up from the recumbent posture of woe into which he had lapsed on his return from the telegraph office, and putting his utterly staggered servant out of the room by main force. On James then becoming riotously reproachful, and maudlingly threatening, Mr. Ponsonby opened his lips to give utterance to words the like of which James had undoubtedly never anticipated hearing from him.

“Go to the Black Bull or black ruin, as soon as you please, you scoundrel,” he said, in a low voice that had nothing of rage in it. “Go, with the gold you have too long and too easily screwed out of my weakness, folly, and cowardice. For more than five-and-twenty years—for the best part of my life—I have lived in terror of your betraying me, and have submitted to be thought guilty of one deed for the sake of shrouding another. My fear of you is over to-night. I betray myself; you can do me no harm.”

He closed the door abruptly, and left James to his own reflections, which were far from pleasant. Mr. Ponsonby sat down again with his head in his hands, and longed yet more impatiently for Sybil's father and mother to come.

The doctor was leaving the sick-room. He could do nothing more, he said; time and the restoratives had had their due effect; the action of the heart was restored, and Sybil had come out of her unconsciousness, but with a terrible exhaustion upon her. Before he quitted the room, he paused to take one of

Helen's hands between his own two, and to softly mould it, as it were, in testimony of his approval of her as a sister and nurse. From inquiries made, it had occurred to the rising young doctor, who was of no particular family, that it would be a good investment to glide into the good opinion—may be eventually the heart—of one of General Rivers's daughters, and co-heiresses.

"This scene has been too agitating for you," he said. Oh! how *much* more tenderly than John Leighton had spoken to her when she went down to tell him how anxious she was an hour ago. "Let me entreat you to take something—a glass of wine and a biscuit."

It is always intensely amusing to me to hear a person in the last stage of hunger or fatigue, offered one of these sandy bits of impossible-to-swallow dryness, yclept a biscuit.

Helen accepted the proffered refreshment. "But I cannot go down," she said, looking up into the benign countenance of the bland medical Hercules, who was expressing mutely all the interest such large cheeks could express. "But I cannot go down, Mr. Collins—I am not equal to that—and I would rather none of the servants came up here, so I must go without, I suppose."

"Allow me to bring it up to you; I shall bring it up to you in the corridor: I cannot have *you* over-fatiguing yourself, for I rely greatly on your assistance."

This last assertion was parti-coloured, as too many speeches are. From a medical point of view he feels

persuaded that Helen would be rather a retarding agent than otherwise; but as a marrying man, and one whom it behoved to marry money, he certainly did count on her assistance.

So he slavishly brought up the wine, and Helen stood in the corridor and took it in sips, and felt all the indescribable delight such natures as hers experience on finding themselves appreciated.

Leonard, in the meantime, kept on wandering about and around the room where Sybil lay, with all the wild restlessness of a dawning hope upon him. Mr. Collins had patted his hand, too, with most exquisitely subdued sympathy, and had told him that Miss Rivers had a most elastic constitution, and would, he might confidently say, rally. Though Leonard in his impatience that Collins had not recovered her at once called him a humbug and a fool, he took comfort from that assurance notwithstanding.

Sybil had given no sign of recognition for any one of them yet, and now the time that was to test her—to show whether the brain was affected, or whether it was simply utter prostration prevented her doing so—was rapidly approaching.

It was half-past eight; the down-train reached Althorpe at twenty minutes past, so by nine o'clock at latest, those they had summoned, the father and mother, might be expected.

Unintentionally they provided against the delicate difficulty of General and Mrs. Rivers coming along to Waltham together, by forgetting to send a carriage for them.

At about ten minutes past nine the first fly from

the station arrived, and General Rivers—betraying no sign of how he had suffered on the journey—stalked into the hall, where he was met by John Leighton and Roland Nepean, who had undertaken the office of explainers.

He was like iron in his total avoidance of anything like emotion; he listened to what they had to say, and then without replying to it he said, "Take me to my child."

He went in and bent over the bed where she lay with her eyes shut; and then Mr. Collins, very pale with intense excitement now, and quite forgetful of his usual manner, told him in a low voice *what* his presence was to test.

He placed General Rivers at the foot of the bed, where her eyes would fall upon him first; and beckoning the others away not to distract her, and Leonard forward to assist him in rousing, and raising her up, he called her by name gently and distinctly.

She opened her eyes, and as he lifted her lightly from the pillow, she murmured as her eyes caught theirs, "Papa" and "Leonard."

"Thank God," said Mr. Collins, drawing a deep breath of relief; for all his affectation of suavity and popularity-seeking, he was a clever and a kind-hearted man—"And now all you go away and leave my patient to what will do her a world of good—a long sound sleep; she must have no more excitement."

General Rivers, though a man of few words, and though he prided himself upon being able, on all occasions, to subdue everything that bordered on emo-

tion, was but mortal after all. He had not indulged—he had not permitted himself to indulge—from the moment of receiving that telegram—in one hope. If Sybil was not dead when he got there, he would say, “Thank God,” for finding her alive, but he would not expect her to recover. Now, however, the hope that she would do so, was given him very strongly, and the revulsion of feeling was, consequently, very great. The meeting had shaken him terribly, for how like her mother she looked in her pale beauty! He was glad to get out of the room, for Leonard’s hearty grasp completed what Sybil’s voice had begun.

There were tears in his eyes; his lips twitched and worked visibly under his grey moustache: he was glad to get out of the room—he hoped they would let him go somewhere alone to recover his dearly-prized military dignity. Now that the hope *had* been given of his daughter’s restoration, it was too exquisite to be rudely shared or openly commented upon. He could forgive Leonard for being excited and demonstrative—that he felt was to be looked for, “the boy loved her, so no wonder,” he said to himself; but when on his stalking grimly down stairs he found Mr. Ponsonby awaiting him with convulsive gasps of sympathy, he felt nettled—the more when he found it was Mr. Ponsonby’s set purpose to follow him into a room and have a private talk with him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“ Ah ! ladies, beware of a fair young knight,
He'll love ! and—he'll ride away.”

MANY months have passed since we saw General Rivers dragged by his host into an unwilling interview. During that interview a confidence had been made which had the effect of restoring a too loyal friend to the husband who had doubted her, and the children who had mourned her. So far, well ! In all honour, when poor weeping Mrs. Rivers reached the house that night, she was met and welcomed by her husband, and declared “free from all blame.” And then another wife had made a confession. When Mrs. Ponsonby found that things were “coming out,” and that candour would now be the best plan, she plucked up heart of grace, and acknowledged that the influence she had used to constrain her old friend to silence was a false one. She had whispered a lie to Sybil on that day when Sybil—long years ago—had pleaded for the embargo of silence to be removed from her, as far as her husband was concerned. She confessed it piteously, abjectly, with a wretched humility that was a torture to all who heard her. Walter Buller's—Walter Ponsonby's—only

crime had been a very venial one. He had simply changed his name in order that there might be no legal difficulty to his enjoying the fortune that Mrs. Leslie had willed should never go to Walter *Buller's* wife. But Mrs. Ponsonby, choosing to consider this insufficient security, had traded on his constant lasting sorrow for the death his horse had caused, to represent it as remorse to Mrs. Rivers, and to imply—to assert, indeed—that the fatal leap had *not* been an accidental one. It was this which tied Mrs. Rivers's tongue through the long years that had been so long to her; it was this which had weighted her heart so heavily when Leonard's and Sybil's dawning affection first met her eyes. It nearly broke the proud mother's heart the thought that her prized child should wed the son of a murderer. But she had given her promise, and so she would not, she could not, she dared not speak. But now Ponsonby had done it himself, and all was clear and fair, and all would be well. Oh! surely, surely, all would be well now.

This had been the mother's aspiration. We shall see how far the father's tallies with it.

I have said that many months had elapsed since that confidence had been given and received. Once more Mrs. Rivers is seated in the old morning-room where we first met her. Once more she is there as mistress of the house, as happy wife, but not *quite* as happy mother. Sybil had quite recovered the effects of that race with death, but another sorrow had paled her cheek, and saddened her brow, though there was a prospect now of the bloom coming back and the cloud vanishing.

General Rivers had been fierce in his wrath against the unhappy man who had in sorrow and anguish for five-and-twenty years expiated his subterfuge and evasion of a blow that would have been fatal to his worldly prospects. The wording of the will was sufficient. The property was legally his, and though James in a fit of revenge made things public and got it brought into the hideous atmosphere of a law court, the case against Mr. Ponsonby broke down, and he was still the rich Mr. Ponsonby of Waltham. The charge—the other horrible charge that his old servant made against him of having incited the horse to go to the edge of the cliff, though the boy had struggled fiercely to prevent it—broke down also. James was prepared with a good story; he had been a good many years bringing it to its present state of perfection, but the truth was better, and quashed it. He, following his master and Master Fred Leslie up on the cliff that day, saw the former, he declared, take the bridle quite *out* of the hand of the boy, who had thrown his arms up wildly and shrieked horribly as he was sent like a bolt over the edge of the cliff, from whence he was borne home so cruelly crushed and dead. He was subjected to severe cross-examinations on this point, but for some time his evidence could not be shaken. Then a totally unexpected (to him at least) witness stepped into the box. Roland Nepean, whose word no man could doubt, whose integrity none could impeach, was sworn, and declared that he had been the first to go up to the dead horse and rider, and that he had particularly remarked the accurate adjustment of the reins be-

tween the fingers—an adjustment that could not have been effected in the moment of falling.

This had been sufficient. There could have been no waving of arms, as melodramatically described by Mr. James, no horrible struggle, probably no shrieks, for the boy had most likely been unconscious of his danger.

So ended the case against Mr. Ponsonby, who left the court, all parties assured him, “without a stain upon his character,” which assurance is, of course, a great source of comfort to the man who feels that through being dragged into the mire of police reports, his grand old name of gentleman is tarnished for ever.

Walter Ponsonby had gone out from the scene where his character had been sifted, stricken, heart-sore, broken. The dread of its all coming out which had weighted him for years was over, but not what he felt to be the shame and dishonour of this publicity. He lived long enough to hear that his son was pronounced unworthy to be the husband of Sybil Rivers, and his daughter the wife of Lord Ardleigh; and he turned his face to the wall and—died.

“It is the only gleam of anything like light in the whole of this horrible time, Mr. Nepean, that *you* should have been the means of clearing papa,” Alice said to him, as in her mourning garb she stood in the hall saying good-by to him on the morning of his and Leonard’s departure for the Continent. “And now you do us this great favour of going with poor Leonard. Never let him doubt Sybil;

the year of probation will not try *her* too much, I am sure."

"We shall meet again in happier times," he replied. "I shall bring you tidings of Leonard in a few weeks, for I shall return when I once see him more cheerful. In the meantime let me hope that I am not mistaken in supposing that Lord Ardleigh's pusillanimous conduct is the least of your griefs."

"You are right," Alice answered, blushing a little. "That's another gleam of light that I nearly forgot; not but what," she continued, candidly, "I own that I was a little disappointed, *even in him*, when I offered to release him from our engagement, and he so palpably jumped at the offer. He was completely cowed and beaten before he came over here. He told me since things had come out that his sister Blanche had been awful; still I was disappointed."

"Only by his meanness, I hope."

"*Only* by his meanness; not, I assure you, at the non-fulfilment of his vows."

And Roland Nepean went off knowing that she meant it.

Sybil had passed a very trying time; her father had, after much solicitation, promised his consent to the marriage eventually, provided Leonard would go away and swear to hold no communication with Sybil, and not endeavour to influence her heart in any way, for the space of one year. Leonard had agreed to the plan, simply because he could not help himself, and poor Sybil had writhed under it. They both knew that that year would be employed by the

General in all kinds of honourable strategies that would be adverse to their plans matrimonial.

But after a time Leonard had found that it was not at all an unpleasant arrangement. He was morally certain that Sybil would be true to him; he was also morally certain that he should be true to Sybil; but it was nice to be tempted from the path of duty by beauties of all lands, and it was very nice not to be obliged to write love letters.

Leonard was a very good, loyal, noble fellow! but those who pictured him mooning about the hills, and wailing for his absent love under the stars made a mistake.

On this special morning when I re-introduce them, Mrs. Rivers and her two daughters were sitting alone. They were all employed in making up into graceful forms delicate bits of insertion and Valenciennes lace—things which look, when made in great numbers, as if they were intended for the trousseau of a bride.

You could see at a glance by the way in which Helen smiled, and evidently perpetually congratulated herself on her skill in rounding the corners of collars and cuffs,—you could see by this and the sharp gaze she occasionally directed at the progress her mother and sister were making, that these things were for herself.

I should like very much to have married Sybil first, but I cannot do it: in the race for matrimonial honours the favourite is not to win in these pages. But by listening to their conversation we shall comprehend more clearly how matters stood than by indulging in a discursively retrospective chapter.

"That is what I heard, mamma. I was foolish to let such a thing slip before Sybil, but Sybil does not believe it any more than I do; still, when Mortimer told me, I could not help saying, 'If it's true it's abominable, and poor Sybil is very badly used.' Mortimer agreed with me."

"I wish 'Mortimer' would be good enough to keep his sympathies to himself," said Sybil, pettishly. "Why on earth Leonard should not go to a picnic in Rome without that portion of England which chances to get hold of the fact waxing virtuously sympathetic with me about it, I cannot imagine."

"Idle gossip, dear Sybil," said Mrs. Rivers, looking up—"Idle gossip, depend upon it; but even if it *were* true," she continued, the faintest tinge of a blush crossing her cheek as she spoke, "even if it were, I should hope neither of *my* daughters have hearts so shallow as to allow their depths to be stirred on hearing that the man who is to be their husband has found pleasure in the society of another woman. Mr. Collins's knowledge of his own sex, I must say, Helen, is poor and scant indeed if he believes that only those who premeditate playing false conform to the usages of society, instead of always howling in a wilderness."

"Mortimer didn't believe it, mamma; he said it couldn't be true."

"But, my dear child," said Mrs. Rivers, resolutely, "why shouldn't he believe it? and what reason is there that it should be desirable to consider it false? What if Leonard, instead of having been at one little

picnic, got up by a few select English people, had been at twenty or a hundred? And what if, being at these picnics, he had never left the side of Mrs. Dervil's sister? Kate could talk to Leonard about one who has a warm place in our hearts—about her frank, noble-hearted sister. Why should Mr. Collins, why should *you*, affect to consider it aught but to Leonard's credit if these things were?"

"I had no idea, mamma, when I repeated such trifles, that Sybil would feel jealous; if I had once given my heart to a man *no one* could shake my confidence in him. I should choose to judge for myself, and would not submit to being influenced by other people."

"That is all very true, and right, and proper, Helen; but that being the case, I wonder at your thinking it worth while to risk giving Sybil a feeling of temporary aggravation by repeating scandal that Mr. Collins cannot avoid (I hope) hearing in the course of his daily rounds. But your last views as to trust and confidence are shared by your sister; are they not, Sybil?"

Sybil thus directly appealed to could not withhold her assent. She felt very thankful to her mother for what she had said about banished Leonard; but she did wish that reports of Leonard's consoling himself with the companionship of that frank, *piquant*, wily coquette, the youngest daughter of Lord Banners Dutton, were not so rife. Nevertheless, though these sentiments were raging in her heart, she had no intention of allowing her mother even—Helen, and—least of all—Mr., or as he now was fairly

entitled to be called "Doctor," Collins, to fathom them. So she said that she was delighted to hear that Leonard had met with the Banners Duttons abroad—it would make his time of enforced absence pleasanter to him. Helen, with the view possibly of setting her sister's mind completely at rest on the subject of Leonard's dolours, appended the remark that Mortimer's friend had told him that Mr. Ponsonby was looking *exceedingly* well; she also gave the comforting assurance to Sybil, that *whatever* Mortimer heard in the future he would be careful to bury in the recesses of his own and her (Helen's) heart.

How it had come to pass that the lady we left betrothed to the Cornish gentleman of large estate and long pedigree should now be hemming piles of lace towards a matrimonial alliance with the plump medical practitioner, was in this wise.

Helen had taken a cold during her attendance on her sister in that agitating time at Waltham; and, aided by Mr. Collins, she had nursed it into so much of a mild kind of pink fever as rendered it advisable for him to keep a watchful eye over her. He played his part with a rare tact and skill, considering the end he had in view. The contrast between his "unselfish devotion," Helen called it, and kind-hearted John Leighton's strained attention, that never even after the hardest straining amounted to more than absolute indifference, was too much for Helen's vanity. Mrs. Leighton—the fierce old queen-mother—had come down to Waltham uninvited in the midst of the rack and ruin there, for the express purpose of

seeing her darling Sybil, and she weighted the scale considerably in favour of Mr. Collins, by overlooking the existence almost—the illness completely—of her future daughter-in-law. Helen had a little “mettle” —it came to her by inheritance; it was not much, but it was enough, taken in conjunction with the other things before mentioned, to induce her to whistle John Leighton down the wind in a manner that commanded from that time forth his unbounded love, admiration, and gratitude. The way in which he presently met and shook hands with Mr. Collins, despite “his having beaten him,” he said, infused a savour of doubt into that individual’s mind as to the value of the jewel he had won.

The rest of Helen’s friends did not take the transfer so kindly at first. Sybil honoured Mortimer with nothing more than a passive acceptance of him as a fellow-creature that may have had something to do with that detailed account of the art-life (!) Leonard was leading in Rome. The General pronounced him a snob of the purest, clearest water, with an open candour that was quite refreshing to listen to in this opinion-concealing world. And Mrs. Rivers hoped they would be happy, as became a mother, but wished his cheeks had not been quite so puffy notwithstanding.

Doctor Collins had now stepped in, as he called it, to a nice softly-rolling-on — rolling-on — West-end practice. He did his professional visits in a perfectly correct brougham—dark brown, with the slightest possible lining-out of red, and his ciphers on the panel.

He had taken a house—a grand house, but not a pretentious one—and he had caused it to be furnished with a heavy splendour befitting his profession. In crowded thoroughfares, or about where people knew him, he was always to be observed leaning back in one corner of his brougham with a note-book in his hand, and austere reflection upon his brow. But in society he was as plumply, blandly, genial as of old, down in the country practice where he had “made” himself. All things considered, General Rivers’s eldest daughter was going undoubtedly to make a good match.

CHAPTER XXIV.

“And a bud to whisper me,
Something that he *dared not* speak.”

“How *did* you feel when you saw the horse drop?
You must have wished you had wings.”

The speaker was Mrs. Dervil's youngest sister Kate, and the person she was addressing was Leonard Ponsonby, who stood leaning against the balcony of the window, where Miss Kate sat enshrined in flowers and blue silk hangings.

It was the window of a room in a French Hotel Lord Banners Dutton and his family were returning to England, and Leonard had thought fit to see them so far on their way. They were to leave Paris the following morning for London, he for Rome.

The speech recorded above came in the course of a conversation on a subject they were constantly ventilating, as the phrase is. Kate took a great interest in Leonard, and she liked to fancy that she took a great interest in Sybil too. At any rate, talking about Sybil was safe for both of them. So now for the fiftieth time she had started the well-worn topic of that fatal gallop; she had started it when they had been a long time in that balcony, and silence was becoming too eloquent.

"How did I feel? Mad, I think. I should have turned to stone, I believe, if your sister had not called out before any one else could speak, that *she* was alive. I shall always be immensely fond of, and grateful to, Mrs. Dervil, for all she did and said that time."

Kate gave a little shudder.

"It must have been a terrible time altogether—the very memory of it must be awful to you, and yet I have the bad taste—I am fascinated somehow or other into frequently speaking of it. You must forgive me; you must impute it to the interest I take in you—and Miss Rivers."

She extended her hand to him as she said it; she was a pretty girl, with large bluish-grey eyes—eyes such as the song of Norah Creina conjures up in our minds. She had a broad white brow, and a laughing mouth—not very small, but full of glittering pearly teeth. And she had a full, gracefully luxurious figure; and a manner that had an Irish softness and an Irish warmth and vigour about it. Leonard took her hand and—forgave her, I suppose, the interest she took in himself and Miss Rivers.

"When I go back to London shall I see Miss Rivers, and carry a message from you?" (She knew the terms of Leonard's banishment.) "I shall be sure to meet her if Carry is in town, but if you like I will make a point of calling upon her, and telling her a lot about you."

Leonard hesitated; the plan, as she unfolded it, seemed very kind and considerate; only Sybil might not see it in that light.

"Sybil would be delighted to see you—delighted ; but I should hardly like you to call with a special message from me—at least not with that avowed purpose. You see it would be against the terms I gave my word I would keep for a year."

"How glad you will be when that year is over !" said the young lady, pensively.

"Very," said Leonard, heartily. "I shall marry then, and end this wretched wearing life," (he forgot at the moment how very little "wear" and wretchedness there had been in his life in Italy while Kate had dwelt there).

"Ah ! you will be glad, I've no doubt : what an old horror her father must be !"

She could not—she had no right or reason to abuse Sybil, but really at that moment it was a great relief to abuse some one who belonged to Sybil.

"No, he isn't," Leonard answered, honestly ; "he is rather severe in some of his notions, but a thorough gentleman. One would rather be a little hardly used by one of those true, unblemished old pieces of steel, than kindly treated by a snob. I would, I know ; wouldn't you ?"

"No, I wouldn't," replied Miss Kate, shortly ; "but he is Sybil's father, and I presume that covers a multitude of sins in your eyes. I don't fancy you would say you liked being 'hardly treated' by any one who hadn't *that* claim on your forbearance."

"Very likely not," replied Leonard, in simple good faith ; "but then he has a claim which I can never forget on me."

"What is it ?"

"He suffered a good many painful years, through my poor father's weakness and my mother's dread of things coming out that did come out after all."

"Oh! I beg your pardon—I beg your pardon, Leonard."

She said it all so sweetly, with such a frank, unchecked grace, especially his name—she had never called him "Leonard" before—that he could not but award her his forgiveness in equally warm terms.

"I am always unfortunate in saying things that I had far better leave unsaid; you will hate me for my heartless, cruel want of taste, in asking you questions and saying things that recall old and happily buried memories. You will see me go away to-morrow with pleasure; and you will go back to Rome—to dear old Rome, where I have been so happy with you!—and feel it a relief that I am not there to take up any of your time. Will you feel glad to see me go, Leonard?"

"Glad! no; very far from that."

"And will you sometimes think of me when we part?"

She had not the remotest desire of winning him from Sybil; but she was a coquette—a coquette who always let her own heart go in the game—and she did wish that his acquaintance with her should be one of the most softly sweet memories of his life. She liked him very much, and she wanted him to like her; to be true to Sybil—*that*, of course—but to have his heart swayed a little at a parting that would surely sway hers; and to feel that she was very "charming," and that, if things had not been dif-

ferently ordained, she could have made life's happiness for him. All this she wanted him to feel; and all this—really, my hero is in danger!—Leonard was not very far from feeling, as she looked up in his face, with the light eyes veiled by their dark lashes, and asked him, “Would he sometimes think of her?”

She was all the more dangerous because she “meant no harm;” she would not in reality have beguiled any man from his allegiance; but she did many things thoughtlessly and rashly—and amongst these things were taking hearts and giving her own.

She had lovely, tiny, milk-white hands; and these hands—after the manner of women who have imperceptible ones—she used to illustrate things constantly, and to give force to her arguments or entreaties. So now, when she asked Leonard not to forget her, she—sitting on a low chair the while—clasped her little hands together and laid them, with a caressive, imploring touch, upon his arm.

Nine months of the year of banishment had expired. Through all that period the memory of Sybil had never been so faint as now, when he responded to the request by bending down his head till the ends of his long silky moustache brushed the hands of the lady.

“You must not ask me too many things,” he said; then raising his head, with a flush—perhaps from a dying sunbeam—on his brow, “for I could say ‘nay’ to no request of yours.”

“It does seem so strange,” said the lady at last, with the air of reckless, pensive, retrospective, mournful gaiety that moonbeams and fatigue are likely to

engender,—“It does seem so strange, after having had you for like a brother almost *so* long, that now we should be going to say good-bye to it all.”

That phrase “for like a brother” is treading on the thin ice when the gentleman is engaged; having had him “for like a brother” means that he has been rather more attentive to the lady’s lightest wish and behest than half-a-dozen brothers, or even cousins, have ever been found to be.

“But we are not going to say ‘good-bye’ to it all,” remonstrated Leonard; “we are only going to say ‘good-bye’ for a little time; for I assure you, you will be one of the first people I shall seek when I return to England—and I hope that will be before long.”

“One of the first!” What woman was ever contented with being “one of the first?”

“Ah! but you’ll be married then,” she said, “and your wife will hate me, perhaps; and then you won’t like me any more—and, altogether, as I said just now, things will be so different.”

She gave a long-drawn sigh, that was honestly meant enough. She had a nameless feeling of dissatisfaction at her heart, or she would not have been unjust enough to betray the dislike she had recently conjured up against Sybil, as she did in that speech wherein she prognosticated that Sybil “would hate her.” Women always say that of one whom they are inclined to feel jealous of themselves.

“Look here,” said Leonard, rather dejectedly—his conscience was not quite clear regarding sundry pretty speeches he had been in the habit of making, at very short intervals, during the last few months—

"look here, Kate! don't go away and leave a fellow sorry for a whole lot of things; there is never any saying what may turn up; don't go away in the blues."

"Oh! I shall not indulge in blues long; but—*such* a happy time is past, Leonard!"

"Give me that rose as a memento," said Leonard, impulsively; and as she gave it, he took both the hand and the gift, and almost crushed them in his strong clasp.

On the same July evening, and almost at the same time the balcony scene was being enacted in Paris, Sybil, in London, was being subjected to temptations of divers kinds.

In the first place, there was the temptation to feel out of humour with the existing order of things, which planted her in a close, hermetically-sealed brougham, with Dr. Collins, her brother-in-law, immediately opposite to her. He was one of those passive nuisances which, when one is tied up with them in any way, are so hard to endure. In his double character of brother-in-law and care-taker of herself to-night, he was particularly obnoxious to Sybil. It was all very well for him to gently draw the Cashmere burnouse more closely over the shoulders of his wife, but really Sybil thought he might have left *her* free to catch what cold she could in that odious brougham. She drew herself back with a gesture of annoyance, and then Helen—Mrs. Collins—looked severely hurt at her sister's ingratitude, and begged Mortimer "not to trouble himself again;" and when Sybil said "she hoped he wouldn't," Mortimer himself looked at her

with a stout forgiveness and a benign oiliness that was aggravating.

Mrs. Rivers preferred staying at home with her husband—trying to make up in the evening of life for those hours of companionship they had lost in their meridian—consequently she was very glad of deputing the task of chaperoning Sybil to the married sister, to prudent Mrs. Collins.

But Sybil hated the arrangement which placed her for the time being at Doctor Collins' disposal. She recognized in him intuitively a secret foe to Leonard; she knew the man had no cause for disliking her lover, but she felt that he did dislike him, and, with a woman's keenness in such matters, she detected the grounds he had for the feeling, though he was scarcely conscious of them himself. Leonard had always borne himself in a sort of lofty, careless way to the Doctor—he had a good-natured contempt for “rising men,” who rise through what is sometimes called self-help, and which has not a little to do with toadyism; and this good-natured contempt, carelessly veiled as it was, had caused Mr. Collins to eat mental humble-pie occasionally—and this is a dish we never like well enough to feel grateful to the one who causes us to partake of it. So the end of it was that, “for Sybil's sake,” he told Helen he “should keep a sharp eye on that young fellow's doings while he was abroad affecting to wear the willow.”

The brougham rolled them on up to the door of a house where more than one old friend of theirs and his was assembled to meet them.

Lights, flowers, women in gauze already bruised, and men in white ties already limp, packed tightly together on a well-staircase, proclaimed unmistakably that the scene of festivity was a ball. The strains of a band and the thumping of a floor overhead proved to them as they entered that proceedings had commenced—in fact, that they were well on. They had anticipated its being a crowded affair, for the lady whose hospitality they were about to enjoy they knew was one who never dispensed it until driven to dire necessity, and then took care to get every acquaintance that she possessed together, in order to take her full benefit out of the contract supper.

They had anticipated its being crowded, but their worst anticipations were more than realised. Of the party, Dr. Collins alone maintained a smiling exterior—he foresaw much fainting, and a possible increase of practice.

“I suppose you are in no great hurry to get up, are you, Sybil?” Mrs. Collins asked, looking back over her own and her husband’s shoulder at Sybil, who was struggling through a brace of Dowagers.

Sybil was just answering “No, she would just as soon not get up at all,” when her sister drifted out of ear-shot. At the same moment a voice that was very familiar to her said,

“Sybil! Miss Rivers! I *am* delighted to see you again;” and she looked round to meet the frank hand and eyes of Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh.

“And I am glad to meet you,” Sybil tried to answer heartily; but she thought of Leonard, and how another pair of eyes, and a hand similarly frank,

might be meeting his at the same time. But Mrs. Dervil would not notice the lack of cordiality.

"We must not separate again immediately," she said ; "here, cannot you take Ardleigh's arm?" So it came to pass, almost against her knowledge and consent, that she entered the ball-room thus, and "people looked."

CHAPTER XXV.

"Oh! young Lord lover! what sighs are those
For one who will never be thine?"

SYBIL had frequently met him in society during the season—*that* she had not been able to avoid; but she had never, since they all parted after that miserable time at Waltham, touched his hand in friendship. Now a combination of circumstances forced her into this exhibition of intimacy with him. She did not know how much rather she would have had it otherwise, till she found, on rejoining her sister, that the eyes of Alice Ponsonby—of Leonard's sister—of Lord Ardleigh's former betrothed—were fixed upon her face.

"I must go and speak to Alice Ponsonby, Helen," she said, hurriedly; "she is here, I see, with old Lady Stuart, Mr. Nepean's aunt."

"*Do* wait a moment, Sybil; how it will *look*, after all these reports, if you hunt after Miss Ponsonby directly you catch sight of her! I think it would be her place to come and speak to you."

"Decidedly," said Doctor Collins.

"You are really neither of you competent judges of what I ought to do," Sybil answered, coolly;

"Alice has looked away now, but as soon as she turns her head I shall go up and speak to her; *you* can do as you please."

"You needn't be afraid of losing Sybil, Mrs. Collins," said Mrs. Dervil, laughing; "I shall go with her to speak to Alice, so if you miss Sybil in the crush you will know she is well taken care of. How do you do, Mr. Meredith?" she continued, as a fair-haired young man made his way up to her, with an air of having something to say; "when did you come back?"

"Yesterday:—I am very fortunate to see you so soon, Mrs. Ardleigh. I conveyed a packet to your house this morning very carefully—a precious brooch I believe it is; your sister was very desirous that you should have it rapidly, so she charged me with it. But they return to England to-morrow."

"Who? Papa and Kate?"

(Sybil's heart palpitated at *that* name.)

"Yes: I left them in Paris; Ponsonby was with them, of course."

"Was he?" replied Mrs. Dervil, carelessly, but colouring very much. "Tell me about this cameo brooch? I want to hear if it's good."

"I believe it is—Ponsonby sets up for a judge in such matters, and he pronounced it beautiful. I have to congratulate you," he went on in a lower tone, but still in one that was terribly distinct to Sybil.

"I think you are mistaken," she answered, drily—almost stiffly for Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh.

"I think not," he replied; "you may rely upon my

information, I assure you. Ponsonby is a lucky fellow too—your sister is universally admired.”

“Yes,” Sybil said, almost eagerly, in reply to Lord Ardleigh’s request that she would waltz with him. The next moment, with her brain on fire and reeling, she was off with the man who had jilted Leonard’s sister.

General Rivers, though not a cruel man, had applied a cruel test—considering the heart of his daughter might suffer in the trial.

They stopped after a round or two ; Lord Ardleigh knew that he would have panted loudly had he gone another step, besides which, he wanted to look at Sybil now the glow of excitement was on her cheek and brow. She looked marvellously lovely! her beauty, always great, had deepened and intensified of late. Lovely women there were in the room—his own “old love,” Alice, was there, looking fair indeed in the crape robe she wore ; but not Alice—not one of them—could compete with Sybil ! How a coronet would grace her, he thought ; rather, how she would grace a coronet, he immediately mentally added, as he ventured once more to glance at her as she stood there.

She had remained in the same attitude in which she had paused from the whirling waltz ; she had rested one round white, polished shoulder against the wall, and thrown her head back to rest that also. Her lips were parted with what would have been a smile, had not the expression of the eyes contradicted it so flatly. There was a rich flush on her cheek, and a glow on her brow, and a deep fiery brilliancy in her

eyes, that "rendered her glorious beauty" in a way that had never struck him before. She had a noble figure—a throat like a pillar, and shoulders whose broad free curve would allow of that exquisitely poised head being turned round with the graceful bend no narrow-shouldered, short-necked, woman can attain. A glorious figure! a most perfect beauty! it *was* a pity, he thought, as he looked up at her, that she should have been so unmistakeably an inch or two taller than himself.

Lord Ardleigh, who had been accustomed to nothing better from Sybil all the season than small occasional cold bows of acknowledgment when she couldn't help seeing him, was almost astonished now at his own good luck in gaining the prized hand of the belle for the first waltz. Why should he not dare a little more, he thought? so he pulled his moustache, and said—

"What amazing courage you have, Miss Rivers! Shouldn't have thought any girl would have ridden again after the escape you had!"

Sybil shuddered—not at the memory of the escape though.

"Should you not? why not?"

"Well, to be sure you might safely count on no one else being so imprudent as that fellow was."

"What?" interrupted Sybil.

She came up erect in a moment out of her resting position, and her blue eyes dilated with a look that was fine, but furious. Lord Ardleigh marked it, and came out of his little difficulty in a manner worthy of Lord Ardleigh.

"So imprudent as that fellow Boyle sending home a half-broken horse for a lady to ride: it was a shameful thing!"

"It was to be—it was fate; out of that ride all the difficulty and trouble came," Sybil answered, rather gloomily. "It is over now, though," she continued, with a sort of defiant flash in her face and manner. "Let us begin afresh, Lord Ardleigh:" she put her hand on his shoulder as she spoke, as if her last words bore reference solely to the dance, but he attached another meaning to them.

"It *is* over now," he said, meaningly. "I knew when I *saw* you in danger that day that the sooner some things were over the better for my peace of mind. I dare say," he continued, sanctimoniously, yet with a queer little expression of "watch" upon his face, "I dare say, Miss Rivers, that you have often blamed me for certain things: you little know how much thoughts of *you* had to do with the decision I came to."

"Had they?" said Sybil, wearily. "I am tired of waltzing and of standing still; I shall go back to my sister now."

And Lord Ardleigh had to curb his impatience to say more, as the lady rapidly threaded her way through the throng: he must wait yet longer, he found, before he could with prudence ask for the hand that lay so lightly on his arm.

Mrs. Collins was seated with her chin up, in a corner where society, from being huddled together, had excluded all view of the dancers. She had not seen Sybil's sudden start with Lord Ardleigh, and she had been enduring much mental anguish through a dread

she had conceived that Sybil, in spite of everything, had gone off to speak to Alice Ponsonby. It was with rare gratification, therefore, that she saw her return on Lord Ardleigh's arm: she lowered her chin and smiled unconstrainedly once more.

"Dear Sybil," she whispered, when the young nobleman had left them, after securing Sybil for many more dances than Sybil meant to stay for,—“Dear Sybil, how I pity you for hearing about that horrid wretch *here*!”

"Thank you; don't call names though, please, Helen."

"Mortimer has heard a lot more from that Mr. Meredith; he has been talking to him since you went away just now."

"I don't care to hear anything," said Sybil; "your husband need not trouble himself on my account to talk to strangers about people he scarcely knows."

"I can't bear that that *man* should triumph over you in such a way, Sybil; if you had *my* spirit, aha!"

Mrs. Collins's head shook in her virtuous indignation.

Now why should Mrs. Collins have felt hatred and malice against a man who had never done her the remotest harm? It was not only that she thought he was playing her sister false—this was not the feeling that barbed her tongue and made it poison the wounds she was making in Sybil's heart. It was that wifely loyalty which mean-spirited men sometimes command. Her husband had unconsciously allowed her to know that he had smarted under Leonard's disregard of him in former times; perhaps

somewhere away in the bottom of her heart she felt that this man whom she had married was not altogether undeserving of contemptuous disregard—but she hated Leonard for having shown it.

“If I had your spirit, I should do ‘what’?” asked Sybil.

“Not give him the chance of triumphing over me.”

“I do not mean to,” Sybil answered. “Now you have said quite enough, Helen, and—I won’t stand any more.”

She clearly meant it. Mrs. Collins was cowed into consideration. And after a time Sybil went off again with one whom all in the room were beginning to pronounce the favourite.

“I never saw Sybil Rivers look in such wild spirits as she does to-night; did you, mother?”

Mrs. Leighton put up her glass and gazed keenly at Sybil, who was promenading slowly round, talking and laughing energetically with Lord Ardleigh.

“H’m,” she replied, dubiously.

“I think Leonard must be coming home, and that it is all settled at last.” John Leighton had evidently got over the worst part of the pangs he had endured on Sybil’s account; he spoke quite cheerily of Leonard’s return and its consequences.

The Honourable Mrs. Leighton dropped her eyeglass with a suddenness that made her son start, and fixed her slate-coloured eyes sharply on his.

“She’s in spirits of the wrong sort, John; go up and bring the child to me. I don’t like the look in her face to-night. I never saw it there

before. It strikes me her father has gone a little too far."

"I can't go up and take her away from her partner, mother. I shall see where she goes when the dance is over, and then I will ask Sybil to join you."

"Do not be too long about it," his mother replied; "the sooner you get her away from *that* partner the better. I don't like to see Sybil Rivers dancing with a man who treated Leonard's sister so."

"She could hardly get up a feud with him, mother; see how her own father treated Leonard on the same grounds."

Mrs. Leighton shook her head. General Rivers was a topic it was unsafe to broach before her; she had never forgiven him his former treatment of his wife; his treatment of his daughter was a thing too maniacal, in her opinion, to be discussed by sane people.

"Sybil, I want to speak to you. My mother wants you."

Sybil looked up to meet the tenderly friendly gaze of John Leighton, from a conversation, apparently of the deepest interest, she was holding with Lord Ardleigh.

"I cannot come now, John. I will be with Mrs. Leighton presently."

Sybil looked excited, and Sybil spoke abruptly—two things that seemed not well to John Leighton. The fact was, that Lord Ardleigh had just asked her a question that, as a lady, she could not defer answering.

"Miss Rivers is engaged." Lord Ardleigh let his

words drop slowly out of his mouth, with a provoking distinctness of utterance that made the blood of the man he addressed surge hotly through his veins; he stared at John Leighton, too, in a manner that implied that the sooner the latter relieved them of his presence the better they would both be pleased.

"Miss Rivers is engaged," he repeated.

"I know she is," John Leighton replied, recovering his usual cool, careless air by a mighty effort; "and it's to speak to her about the man she is engaged to that my mother wants her now."

He offered his arm to her as he spoke, and still Sybil hesitated; she was burning with indignation at being thus reminded of Leonard—of Leonard, who had scorned, slighted, *deserted* her; but there was the old atmosphere of somewhat authoritative friendship about Leighton, and so, finally, Sybil took his arm, with a low-toned apology to Lord Ardleigh for leaving him thus, and a promise to speak to him later in the evening.

"How dared you," she exclaimed, passionately, when they had reached a seat, for he did not at once conduct her to his mother, "How dared you speak to me of Leonard Ponsonby? *you—you* to hurt me so, and insult me so!"

He saw at once from her manner that something had occurred of which he knew nothing, but his sympathies were too readily Sybil's on all occasions for him to show them outwardly when, in his eyes even, she had done wrong.

"I thought you needed to be reminded of Leonard when I saw you smiling kindly on, and others in the

room accused you of flirting with, the titled cur who insulted Leonard through his sister."

"As Leonard has insulted *me*," she interrupted, trembling with a passion she made no attempt to conceal.

"Pardon me," he said, gravely; "as it is utterly impossible for Leonard Ponsonby to have insulted any woman, much less you whom he loves so truly. My friend deserves something better at your hands, Sybil, than these doubts. Who has been poisoning your mind against Leonard, Sybil? Who has done this shamefully unjust and cruel thing? Don't look fierce at me; I have a right to speak to you in this way: I have the right of having known you since you were a child, and of having loved you since you were a child; and I have the right of interfering when I see a slight cast on an absent man by one who is dearer to that man than life—when that man is such a friend as Leonard Ponsonby is to me."

"You are very warm on his behalf," she said, sneeringly. "What will you think when I tell you that Mr. Ponsonby has himself broken the chains you try to weight me so heavily with? He—your true, honest friend—has not thought it worth his while to be 'off with the old love before he is on with the new.' He is engaged to Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh's sister."

"Have they worried you into believing such a falsehood?"

"No one has 'worried;' perhaps they knew that they had only to wait, and Mr. Ponsonby would unshackle himself—as he has done. I heard *her*

sister congratulated to-night on the engagement. *I* heard it—they all heard it who stood near, *pitying* me, probably. Then *you* come up and heap reproaches on me for listening to a man who has at least been more honourable than Leonard. Lord Ardleigh broke his vows to Alice, but——”

“He has waited till to-night to offer them to Miss Rivers—is it so, Sybil?”

“Yes,” answered Sybil, haughtily. “And now let me go to my sister again, for I suppose all Mrs. Leighton wants of me is to say the same things you have said.”

“No,” he said, laying his hand on her arm; “forgive me for all I am taking upon myself to-night, Sybil. I can’t see *you* rush off into a misery such as a marriage with Lord Ardleigh would be, without trying to stop you. I see it is of no use now my saying that Leonard is not capable of behaving as you are so ready to believe he has behaved, for you are ready now to believe him capable of anything; nevertheless, I do say it, and think it, and some time or other you will be thankful to me for having breasted your wrath. I know Kate Dutton too; she is a light-hearted, not a *bad*-hearted girl: that she has flirted with Leonard I do not doubt, as she would with your father, or with me, or with any other man who pleased her. But that she would engage herself to a man she knows to be plighted already, I *do not* believe; and I ask you not to believe it either. As to your giving Ardleigh an answer to-night, do it at once, if that answer is a negative. But if you desire to be

miserable with him, wait, at any rate, till the evening of the day after to-morrow. Will you promise me, Sybil?"

"I may as well, I suppose," she answered, with a little hollow laugh. "You think that I shall have had time for reflection; but I shall probably only have arrived at a deeper conviction of all men being alike worthy, loyal, and true. Lord Ardleigh is as much to be trusted as any one else, I imagine. However, I'll promise, John; *you* have that claim on me at least."

So Lord Ardleigh, coming up for his answer presently, was given to understand that he must be good enough to wait two days: "she wanted that time for reflection," she said.

She met Alice afterwards, and spoke to her with a bright, cold, metallic cheerfulness, that pained and puzzled Alice, who was in a state of far too great gentle happiness herself to be bright, cold, or metallic with any one. She turned off an allusion Alice made to her absent brother with some remark about their all meeting under new circumstances by-and-by, and being older and wiser. Altogether, she was not the Sybil of old that night, and Alice had an indefinable dread of a cloud settling permanently somewhere.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Of one not easily jealous; but being wrought
Perplexed in the extreme."

It is a fact that I have got my hero and heroine into a scrape, out of which I shall have no small difficulty in bringing them—if I ever do at all—scatheless.

Leonard had gone a little too far in clasping the hand that gave, together with the rose that was given—I acknowledge at once that he had; but in depicting the character of one who has a warm place in my memory, I aim at depicting no piece of ideal, god-like perfection, but simply the man as he was, full of good, honest, hearty intentions, of which he occasionally fell short—far short.

And what shall I say of Sybil? What shall I urge—what can be urged—in extenuation of the plighted woman who will keep another man than the one to whom she *is* plighted hovering in expectancy over her answer of "Would she marry him or no?" Only this, that Sybil was a woman!—a true, loving, affectionate, impulsive woman, urged to desperate jealousy of the man she loved by the idle tongue of rumour. A mere sentimental flirtation is different: when it is well that it should be over, the

lady gives her hand to the gentleman, and wishes him well with all her heart—though *not* in the way he had once thought “well,”—and cares very little who he marries or how he marries. He may wed Florence, the older acquaintance from whom, for *her* sweet sake, he has swerved—or Amy, a newer love, who represents to him now all that is loveliest in woman. No matter ; *she*—the other charmer—gives him her hearty good wishes whenever his name is spoken before her, and, probably, forgets all about him when it isn’t. But when the loved one is supposed false, *then*—adieu to toleration.

Sybil was mortally wounded, not alone in her love, but in her pride. She had thought so highly of Leonard ; she had been used to cite him as an embodied combination of Sir Galahad, Bayard, and the Admirable Crichton. Honour and Leonard were words that were synonymous in her vocabulary : if the one failed her, how could she be expected to believe in the existence of the other any more ?

She panted to give some outward sign of considering herself free from Leonard now ; *she*—pure, noble, proud Sybil—had her whole nature soured so that she longed to proclaim that a socially *nobler* than Leonard was ready to sue for her hand. But she held to the promise she had given John Leighton, and waited for “nothing,” she thought.

She had had one little, short unsatisfactory conversation with her mother in the morning after that unhappy ball ; but her mother’s warm faith in Leonard only served to anger her, now that she was so embittered against him.

"You want to prop me up with foolish hopes—you and John Leighton, mamma—that will fail me presently when I have no redress, and in failing will leave me a laughing-stock."

"Oh, Sybil, Sybil; and what 'redress' are you about to seek now? Have patience, child—dear child, have patience. You wrong Leonard, you wrong yourself, by this hard, cruel haste."

"Mamma, he is *engaged* to her—think of that; while I am waiting, Heaven knows it has been hard enough, and was none of my doing—he has gone and given his light love to a girl he didn't know when he said good-bye to me; and I have loved him so! Oh, mother, I have loved him so!"

"And do still, my poor Sybil. You do injustice and wrong to your whole nature, Sybil, by indulging in these doubts. You do a greater wrong and injustice to yourself and Leonard by countenancing for a moment Lord Ardleigh's impertinent advances to the betrothed wife of the man whose sister he treated shabbily."

But Sybil, in her present state of mind, could not think that Alice had been treated by Lord Ardleigh with aught like the base meanness Leonard had treated *her*. She resolutely declined hearing anything in Leonard's favour or against Lord Ardleigh's claims to superior consideration; and finally, for the first time in their lives, a something like a cloud arose between the mother and daughter.

"She is softer-hearted to Leonard than she is to me," Sybil thought.

"She resents what she considers 'interference'

from the mother, whose long absence has weakened the claim on her children's hearts. Oh! we have much to answer for—her father and I—for that sad, sad breach."

The gentle lady, the true loving wife, would accuse herself to the full as much as she accused her husband, though surely none of the punishment should have fallen on her guiltless head.

"I think I shall go and have luncheon with Helen, mamma," Sybil said at last, when her father came in and the constraint deepened.

Mrs. Rivers followed her daughter up to her dressing-room. "Why do you go where you will be sure to hear something that will vex you, Sybil, though it may not be tangible enough to take hold of? Why do you seek annoyances, my child?"

"Nothing can annoy me any more," Sybil answered, coldly. "If I always shrink from the mention of certain things, the mention of them will continue to cut."

So Sybil dressed herself very becomingly and went to her sister's, where, by the "merest chance," Helen said, she found Lord Ardleigh; and the sight of this young nobleman causing a sudden revulsion in her heart, the tide of warm feeling set in again towards the ingrate Leonard, and she quarrelled with her sister politely, and with Doctor Collins, and caused Lord Ardleigh's eyes to dilate with astonishment and admiration. "*She'd* be able to keep Blanche in order if Blanche came anything like rough-riding over her," he thought. And though Sybil was rather collectedly cool with him, he had

no manner of doubt as to what her answer would be on the morrow.

Lord Banners Dutton and his daughter Kate arrived in town about eight o'clock that evening. They were going to remain for a few days, but quietly, with the shutters up, in fact. The house was in Park Lane, one of those high narrow buildings that look like straight wedges of Cheddar cheese, compressed as they are between two more lordly and pretentious brethren.

But unpretentious as his house was, Lord Banners Dutton knew that, had he advertised his arrival and permitted the shutters to be taken down, he would, even on this first evening of his arrival, have been subjected to the incursions of visitors who would have been more free than welcome; therefore he came home in a battered cab with his fair daughter, behind a gnarled and withered horse, and frightened the old woman, who "did" for the spiders during his absence, into fits nearly.

"You can send a note round for Carry, if you like, Kate," her father said, when they had at last effected an entrance into a room where brown holland disguised the familiar chairs and sofas from their fatigued eyes. "You can send a note round for Carry, and if she can come you'll be quite comfortable together. I shall have some tea, and go to bed as soon as my room can be prepared."

Kate was one of those women who are not to be affected in any way by external discomforts. True, it was rather damp and cheerless, this dark house and lack of preparation; but she made the best of

things. She sent her own maid to prepare her father's room and make his tea, and unpacked her trunk herself, taking out a fresh dress to put on in order to look well should Carry come, and then coming down and giving a homelike air of grace and comfort even to that gaunt drawing-room, where the spiders paused in their weaving operations in order to gaze on that fair young beaming mortal, who seemed to fill the room with light.

She planted herself on a couch in a corner, with a little stand, and a lamp, and a book, and some tea before her, and by-and-by, when her summons was answered by her sister appearing in person, there was such an air of deep satisfaction about her that Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh said, as she kissed her, "Well, on the whole, it seems to suit you coming home 'to the horrible discomfort and confusion' you describe in your note. How are you, Kitty? and how well you look!"

Kate was well, and in charming animated spirits. She was ready to tell her sister everything that had occurred since they parted, save and except the one thing Mrs. Dervil desired to hear, and that was, how much of truth there was in that report which had reached her before, and which had been apparently confirmed last night. But Kate did not touch on the subject herself; she even avoided the mention of Leonard Ponsonby's name; and though she was younger considerably than Mrs. Dervil, the latter knew her blithe, fiery young sister well enough to waive treading on ground she chose to avoid.

If the report was true, *then* she had been completely deceived in the character she had always

been wont to consider so frank and lofty, in spite of the atmosphere of coquetry in which it had moved *untainted* hitherto. If it was false, then she knew Kate would be slow to forgive, and loud in wrath against her for having given credit to it for one moment. So they talked round the topic, as it were; speaking of the time in Rome, of the time in Paris, but avoiding all mention of the one who had made that time so pleasant.

"What a coward I am," Mrs. Dervil thought, "not to ask for that assurance which I am so longing to give Sybil Rivers! afraid of my own sister, too!" But still she *did not* ask for it.

They approached it—they nearly touched it once.

"Have you seen Meredith? has he given you the brooch, Carry?" Kate asked.

"Yes, I have seen him, and he has not only given me the brooch, for which take my best thanks, darling, but a most extraordinary piece of intelligence about *you*."

"About me? indeed! Well, I won't ask you it, dear, for I *don't care to hear it*. What is my little nephew like by this time? not like his father, I hope; for Dervil, though I'm very fond of him, is *not* a beauty, is he? and not like his uncle Ardleigh, I trust more sincerely still. I have bought little Dervil a classical coral and bells. And what is the head of your house—the noble Lord Ardleigh—himself about?"

"About to marry Sybil Rivers—a report which has arisen out of *another*—report says; I hope it's untrue, though."

"Give me facts, please, Carry, not reports; I dislike the latter immensely; I take no interest in them. I don't believe that one about Sybil Rivers, for instance. Has she told you herself? if she hasn't you have no right to talk about it. I should be very indignant if anybody spoke *of* me (no,—that I couldn't help), but *to* me about *my* being engaged to marry anybody else till I told them they might. Now you're looking red, and hot, and cross, and I dare say I am too, and tired into the bargain. So I shall send you home before we quarrel. Oh, Carry, Carry! have you quite forgotten what 'trifles light as air' are to the jealous? Go; I won't say another word to-night."

So Miss Kate despatched her sister unsatisfied. When Mrs. Dervil reached home she found John Leighton awaiting her.

"Well?" he said, eagerly.

She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I wouldn't tackle her on the subject; she told me nothing, and I am inclined to believe there is nothing to tell but—*that she likes him.*"

CHAPTER XXVII.

“Oh! let the solid ground
Not fail beneath my feet
Before my life has found
What some have found so sweet.”

KATE DUTTON sat alone indulging in very bitter reflections. It never occurred to her that a report of any kind of engagement existing between herself and Mr. Ponsonby could have reached England. Had she thought it possible that such a statement could be received and credited, she would have cleared it up at once, and have exonerated Leonard from the charge of such perfidy. But this was an idea that did not enter her mind; what made *her* chary of the subject, what caused *her* bitter reflections, was the thought that report of flirtation number——had reached the ears of her friends, and that they were consequently simply anxious to hear more, in order that they might lecture, condole, blame, and hold forth generally on the topic of how flirting (like virtue) was its own reward, and how “some time or other she’d be sorry for such-and-such a thing.”

Now Kate Dutton was not in a frame of mind just now to hear lectures or listen to retrospections. She

was sorry for—many things; amongst others, that she had ever met Leonard Ponsonby, or, at any rate, that, having met him, she had risked a passage of arms, and let her own heart go in the encounter. This being the case, she was very naturally “indignant rather” that Carry should have led up to the subject pertinaciously as she had done. It had all ended in vapour that half-sentimental friendship,—how indeed else should it have ended?—and Kate wanted its memory to sink to rest and oblivion silently, not to be made the subject of conversation between even Carry and herself.

So when Mrs. Dervil Ardleigh left her she sat alone, unable to fix her attention upon the book she held in her hand; and chewed the cud of bitter reflection, and blamed every body but herself for having them to chew.

Presently—when her sister had left her about half an hour—there came a knock at the hall door, a low, but remarkably clear “visitor’s rap.” “It’s Dervil,” she thought; “dear old nuisance! I wish Carry had kept him from coming to-night.” But the voice that she heard in the hall replying to the old woman’s remonstrance, or remark rather, upon the untoward lateness of this visit, was not the voice of Dervil Ardleigh.

“I am a very old friend of Miss Dutton’s,” it said; “and I come with a message from her sister, who has forgotten something.”

The owner of the voice then walked into the room, and she recognized John Leighton.

“Something has happened to Carry in the minutes

since she left me," she said, springing to her feet and advancing to meet him; but he checked her in speech and in advancing, and in *heart* somehow, by saying, "No, Miss Dutton, I am no bearer of ill tidings. Your sister tried to dissuade me from coming to you this evening; but I took advantage of being an old acquaintance, and of your having a very warm heart, and so I disobeyed her. You will forgive me?"

He liked the look of anger she did not care to conceal, as she flashed her Irish eyes upon him, brimful of Irish candour, and answered, "You pay me an untimely honour, certainly; for the sake of the old acquaintanceship to which you allude, I will try to think it one though. And now, Mr. Leighton, to what am I indebted for this flattering haste to see me?"

She stood herself, thereby giving him no excuse for being seated: she stood with one hand clasping the back of a high-backed chair, with her light figure drawn up and thrown back in a sort of defiant curve. She stood with her bluish-gray eyes bent upon him from under the broad white brow she had the power of rendering so set and steadfast; and he stood opposite her visibly admiring her.

"I like to see you look the old, honest, fearless, angry look you have given me many a time, Kate, when I have crossed any pet plan of yours unintentionally."

She relented a little inwardly as he spoke; she could not help it, it was her nature—one of her foibles—to relent always towards one who admired

her and showed it. The smile, the bright, brilliant smile, that comes forth with such radiance from those eyes of "bluish-gray," flashed upon him for a moment. Then she remembered that he might have come at a more reasonable time.

"You hardly came here at ten o'clock at night to tell me that, when I'm worn out and dead with my journey nearly; if you did, I can only tell you, with the 'candour' you are good enough to say you like, that the compliment would have been better appreciated to-morrow morning."

"You are right," he answered, quietly; "I should be without excuse if I had trespassed upon you so idly. I had a better object,—a higher purpose; and I knew how ready you would be to assist me. I want your authority for quelling a report that is likely to cost two friends of mine great unhappiness unless it is shortly quelled. To be brief," he continued, for Kate's eyes were going through him, "some blockhead has circulated an absurd rumour about your being engaged to Leonard Ponsonby; and Sybil Rivers believes it, and will act upon it."

"Do you believe it?" she asked, slowly, sinking back on to the couch and folding her hands gracefully before her.

"No," he replied, promptly.

"Why do you ask me about it, then?"

"In order that I may take your assurance that it is not so to Sybil."

"She has not the common faith in him, then, that *you* have in *me*. Upon my word, Mr. Leighton, Miss Rivers seems to me, if she can so lightly

suspect him, to be scarcely worthy of Leonard Ponsonby."

"She did not do it 'lightly,'" he said, with a quick, warm defence of Sybil; "she has had much to fight against, much to endure. She knew how well calculated you were to win such a man as Leonard,—any man, in fact; it is her misfortune that she does not know the noble qualities you possess: prove them to her, Kate! will you?"

He went up to her now and took her hands, and she, holding her face averted slightly, in order (she hoped) that he might not see the large tears that were in her eyes, answered,

"Will my saying that Leonard Ponsonby is only—never has been more, never will be more, than 'only' a friend of mine, do, Mr. Leighton? If it will, tell her so, and make her believe it. I can't say any more; it is abominable to want me to parade it, and talk about it, since people have been cruel enough to couple our names."

"Thank you," said John Leighton, heartily; "that is quite enough. I knew beforehand what you would say. No one has been 'cruel,' either, Miss Dutton; it was natural for the majority to suppose that Leonard would do what every other man who meets you does—fall in love with you; very natural indeed to those who didn't know Leonard's story themselves, and didn't know you knew it either. Now if you'll shake hands and say you'll forgive me, I will go away, for your sister Mrs. Dervil will be anxious to hear how my mission has sped. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Kate, cordially. "If you will

come to-morrow I will give you a warmer welcome—and papa shall join me—than you’ve had to-night.” And as he walked out of the room she thought, “I’m afraid you have a higher opinion of me than I deserve, for if Leonard Ponsonby *had* given me the opportunity of saying ‘No,’ last night, I don’t think ‘No’ would have been said. But it is astonishing how good one feels when so much good is attributed to them.”

She fell into a reverie again, less bitter than the former one, when John Leighton left her. And now he—her late visitor—mingled in her thoughts of others. “How good of him!” she thought; “and how straightforward, and unconventional, and unlike other people; in fact, how like John Leighton! There goes the last thing that he would think I ought not to keep and associate with Leonard. I sacrifice in solitude to your good opinion of me, John.” And as she said these words mentally she drew the stalk of a rosebud and a few bruised, blighted leaves from her bosom, and flung them adrift in the room. The rose-bud had been left in her hand when it released itself from the clasp Leonard had impressed upon it on the previous night.

When Mr. Leighton reached home, he found his mother awaiting him with a nervous air of suppressed impatience in her eyes and manner. She knew of his determination to get to the truth some way or other,—either through Mrs. Dervil or by asking the plain, direct question of Kate herself. And the Honourable Mrs. Leighton was anxious to be informed as to the result of the inquiries her son had

gone out from her presence determined upon making: She was an inquisitive old lady, but she was no fool. It's the weak people who ask things feebly and tell things lamely that "try" you most. His mother's inquisitiveness never put John Leighton in a rage, for, as a rule, she found out things for herself, by the aid of her own keen intelligence, and did not trouble him with small questions. True, she would be down upon him with the "fact" when she had discovered it to be one; but that was bliss in comparison to what it would have been had she insisted upon his lighting her along the road to the discovery by responses full and clear.

"Well," she said, when he came in, "what sort of a night is it, John—cloudy or clear?"

"Clear, remarkably clear," he answered.

"Humph!" she replied. On the whole, perhaps, she was a little displeased, though really and truly she desired Sybil's happiness.

"Ponsonby has a great power of attraction about him," John Leighton went on, after a short pause, rather thoughtfully; "and that being the case, he's of course subjected to temptations that don't assail other men; but it's all right, mother, there's no fear of Sybil throwing herself away on that fellow Ardleigh."

"There needn't have been, I imagine, even if Leonard hadn't been so perfect. Sybil would have been a happier woman if you had asked her to be *your* wife, than she will ever be with a man whose 'wonderful power of attraction' causes all sorts of reports that women hate to arise."

John Leighton did not think it behoved him to tell his mother that he had on a former occasion given Sybil the opportunity of being a "happier woman;" and that Sybil had seen fit to reject it. So he passed over that portion of her speech and contented himself with saying,

"Sybil would never have taken me out of revenge, mother; women in her circumstances and her frame of mind marry an Ardleigh or a worse; they don't elect an old friend to the post of tortured one. Besides, I made such a mistake with the other sister that I don't think I shall ever try to forfeit my bachelor freedom again. I don't value it, and consequently no one tries to deprive me of it. 'Woman smiles not on me.' Helen fancied she liked me, you know; but how glad she was to be quit of me after a time!"

"*Helen!*" said Mrs. Leighton, scornfully; "Helen's likes and dislikes are unworthy of being taken as a standard of what a sensible girl would form, certainly. I am talking of a sensible girl when I speak of Sybil, not of a pretty little goose who preferred a large-faced young pill-maker to *my* son. But it never can be Sybil, I suppose, so that's past and over. Excuse me for having mentioned it."

"Certainly, mother!" Yes, he added, mentally, that *is* past and over *for ever* now.

Perhaps if John Leighton had not been conscious that some hope, with difficulty subdued, lived in his heart, whispering, "if Leonard gives her up, why, with only Lord Ardleigh for a rival, may *you* not win?" Perhaps, if he had not been dimly conscious

that he was thus disloyal in thought *against his will*, he would not have striven so hard to clear up the doubt that had come over Sybil with regard to Leonard.

Now, of course, it was over—over for ever; the hope that had flickered up he had blown out even while Kate Dutton spoke.

"She's a sweet little thing," he said at last, half to himself.

"Who is, John?" his mother asked, as she lit her candle preparatory to going to bed.

"Kate Dutton: a charming girl."

"A dangerous young lady, John—a dangerous young lady—if she can make a man forget Sybil Rivers for a day even, as she seems to Leonard."

"Even for longer than 'a day' she may make a man forget Sybil. Good-night, mother."

"I wonder would *she* ever love me?" he thought, as he sat puffing his cigar when his mother had at length suffered him to retreat to his own study. "When she does give it, it will be worth having, I imagine, in spite of other people having portioned it out in lots for her. Leonard—though he can't take it all in honour—is a lucky fellow to have so much given him freely. I wonder *would* she ever love me, or am I doomed to go out of the world without any woman's brow mantling or cheek blanching for me? After all, a man wants something besides his magisterial, and parliamentary, and hunting duties, to interest him and keep his heart warm; and something more sympathetic, when the 'day is done,' than the kiss of a fine-flavoured cigar."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Kate offers up the ghost of a rose (carefully denuded of its thorn) to Sybil.

"WHAT will Leonard, dear Leonard—what will he say when he hears of Lord Ardleigh? John, what *will* he say?"

"He will not like it; you can't expect a man to like the girl he is engaged to letting another fellow make her offers, and keeping him hanging off and on for a day or two. You should have snubbed Ardleigh at once: as you didn't do that, you had better see him when he comes to-day, and tell him civilly and seriously 'that the sooner he drops the subject, and the quieter he keeps his folly, the better. Your father will be sorry, of course, and a little disappointed; he would have liked Leonard to have turned out badly; but that can't be helped. By-and-by, when you're married, and there is no more prospect of things going wrong, your father will give up making people miserable with 'honourable intentions.' This year of probation was a very unnecessary thing, and I am very glad it is nearly ended. If Leonard had been as hot-headed as you are, the affair would have come to grief."

"Ah! but John, Leonard has not had the provocation I have had to be hot-headed. Those reports! they were enough to work one up, now, were they not?"

"You don't know what 'provocation' Leonard has had, or how he has been 'worked-up.' You look rather uncomfortable? I suppose the hour is approaching when Ardleigh may be expected to come for his definitive. Well, I am glad you are uncomfortable about it, because you deserve to be; but I hope he will take his dismissal quietly, and not give you any trouble."

John Leighton left her; and Sybil sat awaiting the unwelcome advent of the man who was coming to ask her hand. Of course she had brought it all upon herself: but when was that reflection ever found to give comfort?—it rather adds a zest to the mental pickle we are in at the moment. She had brought it upon herself—this difficulty—that Leonard might not exactly approve of when he came to hear it—brought it upon herself by the sort of reckless freedom she had allowed Lord Ardleigh to see she felt from the moment that report struck upon her ears.

And now he was coming.

The interview was a humiliating one. How could it be otherwise, considering how little manliness there was in the man with whom she had to deal? In the first moment of their intercourse, Sybil, with a noble humbleness that *should* have touched him, censured herself, and asked his forgiveness—and he withheld it. It was a shameful trick, he said; the

trick of a false coquette, to lure a fellow on to this, and then to throw him over without any more cause than she had when she lured him on. He overwhelmed her with a heap of little spiteful recriminations, which confirmed her in the notion that he would be an ignominious spouse even for the woman who didn't love some one else. He had made up his mind to have her, and he could not have it unsettled again without a severe struggle. She bore it all with dignified gentleness, for she felt that she had deserved all she was suffering for having doubted Leonard for one moment.

If General Rivers felt the loss of a lordly son-in-law—of one on whose father's name there rested no other stain than his having been the most worthlessly dissolute man of his day—he had the discretion to keep such feelings to himself. He said, rather sternly and gravely, that he was glad Leonard had come well out of the ordeal in which he had been unconsciously tried; and he was glad, since Sybil seemed determined to hold to him, that he should be better than from his antecedents he had been inclined to believe him. And then he kissed Sybil with precision on the middle of her forehead, and “hoped she would be happy in her own way.”

But from her mother, Sybil had no lack of triumphant sympathy. Mrs. Rivers had never had it in her heart to doubt the handsome boy whose brow she had kissed with such irrepressible affection so long ago, when she was in her deepest misery; she had never blamed him for his father's and mother's shortcomings, and surely *she* had not suffered less

than the General. And as she had never had it in her heart to doubt Leonard, so she had not the doing so on her conscience now. So, from her mother, Sybil had no lack of triumphant sympathy.

But Sybil had been unstrung a little by these late events; she began to long with fretful impatience for some opportunity to arise that would show her father in a softer phase to her, and so give her the courage to ask him to shorten the time, near as the end already was, of the probation, that *might be*—who could tell?—too much for Leonard, after all. But the opportunity didn't come yet; and in the mean time Sybil made the closer acquaintance of the siren whom report said had partially bewitched him.

It was rather a piquantly amusing study to see Sybil Rivers and Kate Dutton together. They were both on their mettle to show to the best advantage before the eyes of the other. Sybil just showed her consciousness of what had been, by glowing into a deeper beauty, and Kate showed her consciousness of what *might* have been, by keeping her sprightly vivacity in with a steadier hand, and managing it generally better. She might not have been in reality a braver woman than Sybil, but she had more dash about her. Sybil had that haughty reticence, that stately air of passing things over, which may be either excess of courage or excess of fear; but Kate had nothing of the kind; *she* would risk a cut for the glory of the risk.

And so it was that about the third or fourth time of their meeting, *she* was the one to mention Leonard's name.

They were together at the September flower-show, and as Sybil was bending down over a most lovely rose and expatiating largely on its merits, Kate brought her up suddenly into an erect posture, and plunged her into a surprised silence, by saying,

"Yes, it's a fine one; but there's not half such an exquisite flower on the bush as one I gave Mr. Ponsonby the night before I left Paris."

Kate had stayed on with her sister in town for the purpose, *she* said, of cultivating Sybil; but it seemed to that sisterly acute observer that she had invested more time in the cultivation of certain flowers of a romantic description which had begun to bloom on John Leighton's character.

Kate made her small speech for two reasons. One was that she wanted to be friendly with Sybil in the future, and wished therefore to show her that Leonard's name no longer pulled out the tremelo stop in her heart. The other was that John Leighton stood near them, and it might be well that he should understand the same thing. She recognised the desirability of being perfectly frank with a man who would read her whether she was so or not; and she wished to give him an outward sign at once when the emotional passage in the serio-comic opera, wherein her memories of "Leonard" were arranged was past.

So she asserted boldly as she stood under the sun, that showed up ruthlessly every change in her complexion, that the rose, the odour of which Sybil was inhaling, *was* not to be compared with the one she

had given Mr. Ponsonby the night before she left Paris.

"Indeed!" Sybil replied, with a straight face and in straight tones, that she employed her whole will in rendering, without ever so little a swerve of feeling to the one side or the other. "Indeed! Mr. Ponsonby was fortunate to win a mark of such grace from you as that gift must have been, judging from the time it has lived in your memory."

"Oh! I never forget anything that I do, or say, or suffer," replied Kate. "I never *forget* my friendships; they die out sometimes, but they are never forgotten by me, nor am I ever disgusted with myself for having indulged in them. People alter very often; turn out very differently to that which they seemed when I lavished confidence—regard—upon them; but that does not make me regret the fact of having lavished it. For the time being the sentiment made the hours pleasanter; so I have always a kindly feeling towards the one who shared it with me, however far short that one afterwards fell. That being the case with regard to failures, you may imagine I don't forget decided successes; and I look upon having formed a friendship with Leonard Ponsonby as a great success, partly on his own account and partly because he has been the means, indirectly, of making me know you better. I hope we shall never either of us find cause to regret my friendship with Mr. Ponsonby."

Sybil, as she uttered a quieter-toned but no less hearty reply, felt that if Kate was too fascinating for a friend, at least she was too frank for a foe.

"Could you have made that speech about friendships generally, and Leonard Ponsonby in particular, six weeks ago, Kate?" John Leighton asked, as they sauntered on ahead of the others.

"I was seriously in love with a gentleman in a little black velvet coatee, whose name was Herbert something, I've forgotten what, when I was six years old, Mr. Leighton. Have you any question to ask me concerning that early attachment? It would be as sensible as the one you *have* asked."

CHAPTER XXIX.

Alice is made happy, and Brenda miserable.

FORTUNATELY, although it was a fine morning, there was a clear autumnal coolness in the air, otherwise Roland Nepean's substitute at Waltham would have had a trying time of it; for the Rev. Lloyd Price was a stout man, and one who always felt the weather.

This morning he had had a busy time of it; he had been awakened (he lived in two tight rooms in Waltham High Street) as early as seven o'clock, by the popping of fowling-pieces, which sundry humble and enthusiastic admirers of Roland Nepean's were letting off in that gentleman's honour. Mr. Price had resigned himself to the disturbance: he had got up with that miserable feeling men who are not in the habit of getting up early have, that they won't be wanted in the world at that hour. He had not dared to go into the sitting-room; for Susan, his landlady's handmaiden, was of a severe turn of mind during cleaning operations, and he could hear her sedulously brushing up imaginary crumbs from the flowery carpet, off which she was evidently bent upon taking the bloom. From his bed-room window he had watched the whole population of Waltham

surging up and down the street, with extraordinary combinations in their hands of flannel bindings of various colours, old bunting, and all the flowers that a week's raid through the country round could supply. He did not like to go out yet, for he thought it would have a fussy appearance; but he *did* feel anxious as to the decorations of the church.

The fact was that it was Roland Nepean's wedding-day, and all Waltham tried to signify its hearty approval, sympathy, and joy with its Rector on his marriage morn.

Leonard had come home to be present at his sister's wedding. For when I say that Roland Nepean was the bridegroom you can have no doubt as to Alice being the bride. Alice had written a tender appeal to General Rivers to let both children of so unhappy a father as theirs had been be made happy on the same day; and Sybil had backed the appeal with the mute, deep, tender pleading of her gloriously eloquent eyes. But General Rivers, though affected even to bullets in his throat, and to a fog over his spectacles, would not abate one jot of the last bit of sternness he mentally swore he would ever indulge in. He almost humbly sued his wife to ask Sybil *not* to press the point, because he must refuse her, and it hurt him to refuse her, or Leonard either, now. But it hurt him more—the bullets grew larger and the fog thicker—when Sybil, softened into absolute submission by that message, went to him and kissed him, and said she would not ask, but would he promise never to make any more unpleasant vows?

So Leonard and Alice had the kindest of letters from the General, and the most warmly loving ones from Sybil; and Leonard's heart was consequently as light as a brother's should be at his sister's wedding.

It was to be a quiet wedding; that is to say, one clergyman was considered sufficient to tie the knot, and a brace of young beings in blue and white were the sole representatives of that terrible element of young-ladyism which usually makes a wedding a thing of horror to the unmarried men who may be solicited to attend. But a quiet wedding in a country village is a thing that cannot be: it is sure to create a riot, good-humoured or otherwise.

Brenda was immensely excited; not that she exactly realized what was going to happen, but she had seen her master's portmanteau packed, and she liked the sign, for she was fond of travelling.

It was a long churchyard with a little hill in it. Had a princess been married at Waltham she would have been compelled to take pedestrian exercise, for the gate was too narrow to admit a carriage. So Alice had to walk up through a curtseying and watery-eyed little crowd of rustics, who wished her much conjugal joy in various tones and figures of speech, and threw flowers before her towards it.

And the pride, and pleasure, and joy at her heart grew deeper as she walked along, and marked how for the sake of the man she was going to marry these people loved and blessed her more.

I am sorry to be compelled to record one piece of ill-feeling that was engendered in the mind of one

of the principal characters in my tale this day, and never eradicated.

When Mrs. Roland Nepean came out of the church leaning on her husband's arm, Brenda—who had deluded herself with the idea that it had been merely a short Wednesday morning service—went to meet them, and as usual patronised Alice by soiling her dress with one large yellow paw. Still in a calm frame of mind—suspecting no evil—she followed them back to the Priory, and partook largely of refreshments; for the enthusiasm a man creates when he enters a family is frequently extended to his dog, and is shown to the latter by feeding him. So everybody offered Brenda something, and Brenda took what everybody offered her, and was affable.

But when the carriage came round to convey them away, and Mr. and Mrs. Roland Nepean had seated themselves and wafted good-byes to Mrs. Ponsonby, who was half-laughing and half-crying, and Leonard, who was impatient to throw a shoe after them, then Brenda showed that for all she had eaten heavily she was quite ready for a run.

"Keep her back, Leonard—take care of her," Mr. Nepean said, leaning out of the carriage to give a parting pat to Brenda's head. "Good-bye, old girl. Mrs. Nepean has taken your place, you see."

Whether Brenda imagined greater bitterness in the words than was intended, cannot be known—as she never spoke on the subject; but she never forgave Alice, or was cordial with her again.

Mrs. Nepean was very sorry—she would have wished for *his* dog's love even—but as that was the

only drawback to the perfect unclouded serenity and happiness of her married life, of which I have ever heard, she can hardly be considered an object of sympathy.

Perhaps Brenda's was the only heart (except Lord Ardleigh's) that did not rejoice over that quiet wedding in that country church: they made each other so supremely happy.

"I wonder what Leonard Ponsonby will think of me when he hears?" Kate Dutton said to herself, as she sat alone in her sister's boudoir one morning; "because I *was* fond of him, there's no mistake about it; I felt wretched when I said 'good-bye;' no, by-the-by, I *didn't* say good-bye, I *wouldn't* say good-bye; but, at any rate, when I should have said good-bye to him I felt wretched. And now I'm over the brink of it with another, and I wouldn't go back even if Leonard asked me. It was no fault of mine or of his either that he couldn't help talking tenderly of a cup of tea, and looking as if he meant something whenever he spoke about the weather. Now after my having thrilled to gooseflesh (literally), and believed in him as I did, I find that they were only—those sighs—symptomatic, as papa's old doctor would say, of what was to follow."

Here Kate broke off abruptly in her soliloquy and started to her feet with a wonderfully clever air of having been thinking about nothing at all, to welcome the Hon. Mrs. Leighton.

She had not seen that lady since her own days of early girlhood, when John Leighton had seemed too mature in her eyes for his mother to interest her a

bit. But now—though she had scarcely seemed to scan it then—now that it was desirable to do so, she recalled Mrs. Leighton's character correctly enough to act upon it for the best.

"How do you do?" she asked, frankly, offering her hand at the same time; "I thought you would come to-day, but you are kind to come so soon."

"You had better wait a little, *Miss Dutton*, before you take the kindness for granted. I am a plain-spoken old woman, you know. I shall say what I think."

"As you please," Kate answered, carelessly. "I called it a kindness because it looked like one; and as I always put the best interpretation on a thing, I was not likely, you know, to make an unfavourable exception in the case of John Leighton's mother."

She did not say it insolently or angrily: she did not affect to be either hurt or annoyed at the antagonistic tone her visitor had taken. She simply sat there twisting a ring round her finger, not nervously, but because it pleased her to see the rays the opal emitted, and waiting for Mrs. Leighton to go on.

"I have heard of you frequently," the elder lady said, after a short pause. "Do you know what report has told John Leighton's mother about you *Miss Dutton*?"

"No," Kate replied, as if she did not feel much interested in the subject.

"That you are a flirt—too fearless a one to be always discreet—flighty, frivolous, not calculated to make a proud sensitive man happy; far too fond of admiration to care much who gives it to you or how

you gain it. That is what report has told me, Miss Dutton."

"Indeed!" Kate replied, just drooping her eyelids sufficiently to look out straight from under them. "Indeed, Mrs. Leighton. Now I did *not* ask you what you had heard, but you told me. Report has painted *you* to *me* also; would you like to hear what it has said?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Leighton, with difficulty restraining an inclination to laugh.

"That you are a disagreeable, dictatorial woman, too jealously fond of your son to wish him to be happy in any other way than you may choose to point out. That is what report has told me, Mrs. Leighton, and I disbelieved it when it said so, and do so still."

"You will alter your opinion, perhaps, when I tell you that my son asked me to come here to say something kind, and to give you a word of welcome, as you had promised to marry him; and that I came here with the fixed intention of putting a stop to any such scheme, if I could."

"Oh no, I shall not," Kate answered; "you won't do it. I don't mean that you couldn't alone (though you couldn't, you know, if I was determined and he was determined), but you won't have the heart to try. You are going to make the best of it, I see, on the brave old principle of 'what can't be cured must be endured.' Report has made some little mistakes, believe me, Mrs. Leighton, as it always will do in passing through the mouths of venomous women with either eligible sons or ineligible daughters.

Perhaps if you told me who said these things of me, I could tell you the 'reason why' they were said; but as the *one* Cornish man who has a claim to know, is satisfied already, it may be as well to let the subject drop."

"I think so too," Mrs. Leighton said, holding her hands out with an air which looked as if she was dubious as to how Kate would take them. But Kate could afford to make concessions; and the end of that meeting was peace—though Kate, when the point was touched upon, gave her future mother-in-law clearly to understand that, for the complete maintenance of it, it might be well that they should not sojourn under the same tent.

"She showed admirable tact, and temper, and spirit," Mrs. Leighton said to her son, in recounting the interview to him, "and admirable candour too; she called me a dictatorial, disagreeable old woman. You may tell her I am very much pleased with her, John. I should be sorry for Kate to think I threw obstacles in the way." From which John Leighton opined that his fair betrothed had got the whip-hand of his mother.

CHAPTER XXX.

The General is true to himself.

A YEAR has elapsed in their lives since we parted with them, and I now bring the chief characters of my story before my readers for the last time. The ideal romance which marriage ends, was over for them all, and the real romance which comes after had commenced. Leonard had won his bride; and she had banished all small jealousies, or rather absorbed them, into one deep feeling of profound pity for every woman who had not married him.

Once more it is autumn in the Waltham woods; once more the leaves are blooming into that more perfect beauty which is theirs before death, as if in compensation for their dying at all; and the squirrels sprang over heather in flower, and grass that was fading away; and the stillness of the air—from which the insect-life had chiefly departed now—was only broken by the fluttering of the ever-active aspen leaves.

No! I am wrong in stating that it was only the flutter of the aspen leaves that broke the rich silence that hung over the Waltham woods. A bell—a rugged peal of them—came ringing through the air hilari-

ously ; and as they rang out they bore a pleasant message to the hearts of all in the village who loved the lady well—and the message was that Mrs. Ponsonby had brought her husband an heir.

Soon the whole family re-assembled there—Mrs. Rivers, the Collinses, and John Leighton and his wife, for “nearer and dearer than sister was to her,” had Kate become to Sybil—for there was to be a grand christening; the little baby was to be called names with much ceremony.

Now this same naming him was a difficulty that, though the morrow must find solved, they had not succeeded in doing to their satisfaction yet. Sybil thought it very, *very* important; Leonard averred that it was less consequence *what* he was called, than that he should be called something immediately, and learn to look sharp and answer it. “He wasn’t a bad baby, as far as he went,” he added; but he evidently objected to “Baby” as too marginal a form of address, and obliged you to dive into his cheek with your finger in order to gain his attention.

“Call him, John,” Mrs. Leighton suggested; “I think it the finest, dearest old honest name in the world: you ought to, Sybil, as a delicate token of having appreciated my husband’s having paid you the great compliment of falling in love with you first.”

“Ah, John would do as well as anything else,” said Leonard. “Here, Jack!—see, he notices when you call him ‘Jack’ already; at least I suppose you call that noticing, don’t you, nurse?—he cast his eyes up and chuckled.”

"No: just for that very reason, that you would be sure to call him 'Jack,' Leonard; I won't have my boy called 'Jack.' What a dignified baby you must have been," she continued, turning to Leighton, "to have escaped being 'Jacked' or 'Johnnie' (which is worse), in your cradle!"

"It wouldn't do to call him Roland, you see," Mrs. Nepean put in, anxiously, "because his little cousin and he will be always together, and perhaps by-and-by they might make mistakes and fight over their names."

"Thoughtful and far-seeing mother!" said Leonard, in a tone of mock-admiration; "you can look forward to your boy being pugnacious; that shows how far more imaginative woman is than man. I dare say Sybil can too; while, for my part, I can't realise that this will be ever more than a rather damp roll."

"Your father will be down to-night, Sybil," Mrs. Rivers said, taking baby as she spoke; "what do you say to asking him to give this little one his name? I am sure he will be provided with one."

"Pearl of mother-in-laws!" said Leonard, "why didn't you say that before, and save me from being harassed into speeches that, if nurse were not restrained by a fear of making Sybil nervous, she would declare I made with intent to murder my son? Yes, we will leave it to the General."

And then all the younger ones went out into the garden; Sybil, even in these early days of maternity, gladly leaving her small son for the sake of leaning on his father's arm. There are some women like this: fond and affectionate mothers they may be,

but they are fonder and more affectionate wives. I never think that a woman loved her husband when she married him, if, when the children come, he plays that hateful instrument, "second fiddle." It is all right and proper that baby should receive worship and homage, but it must be paid through him to his father, otherwise her character of wife is lowered. So now Sybil took her husband's arm, and went out into the garden with their guests, leaving the two grandmothers (for Mrs. Ponsonby was staying at Waltham) alone.

"Coming to-night," she said, rather thoughtfully. "Sybil"—(for in these latter days the old tie of friendship had been renewed between these two)—"Sybil, tell me the truth. He will not like to meet me here."

"You have sad reason for thinking him harsh as you do," Mrs. Rivers answered, the tears coming into her eyes as she thought of how that one who had died at Waltham had been treated with stern scorn and unforgiving contumely by her husband. "You have sad reason for thinking him harsh as you do; but you will find him changed in all things."

And Mrs. Ponsonby, whose sorrows had given her neither tact nor sense, said, "Ah! he's surely failing, then. Be prepared, my dear; for I've found, when people alter—as poor dear Mr. Ponsonby did, for instance—in that way, that they are near their end."

There had been a great talk in the village, too, as to what name the little heir of Waltham should bear. One obtuse but kind-hearted rustic opined

that Mr. Ponsonby would give his son his father's name, in token, like, of his not being ashamed of him. But this opinion was put down with savage force by James, the now portly landlord of the Black Bull. "The General would see there was none of *that* nonsense," he said.

Melanie had married James; but, instead of developing into the blooming buxom hostess he had anticipated would bring such custom to the Inn, she had withered into a pallid state of untidy wretchedness under his rough unkindness, which almost amounted to brutality. Her children had died: had they lived she could have talked to them in the accents of her native land, and the doing so would have kept her heart green. But they died, and the poor woman found, now the restraint of living in a gentleman's house was over, that the man she had married was a boor, uncouth and coarse. So she lost her pretty piquant ways, one by one, and fell into the awkward tones and habits of those around her, and mourned in her heart over the day she had left her own land. For the people amongst whom her hard lot was cast despised, distrusted, hated her, for being a foreign woman, and for (in days gone by) having shrugged her shoulders, and talked with a freer grace and a glibber tongue than they could achieve.

So she fades away from the humble place she has held in these pages—as she was when I saw her last—a sorrowful, sad-eyed woman, a victim offered up to the truth, that narrow-minded people frequently come to grief over nationalities.

The General arrived punctually at the moment he was expected. And when they had all outvied one another in eagerly welcoming him, the little stranger and the great question of his name were introduced.

"You give the choice of his name to *me*, my dear," he said, bending down to kiss the forehead of the fair young mother, who was holding her child up for his inspection—"You give the choice of his name to me. Let my grandson, then, bear the name of the man whose last hours I helped to render most unnecessarily sad; in scanty atonement for a great harshness—for a cruel want of feeling towards a man who fell short of my arrogant ideas of what was right—let your little son be called Walter."

THE END.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS STAMFORD STREET
AND CHABING CROSS

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